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February 2022 Volume 15 • Number 4

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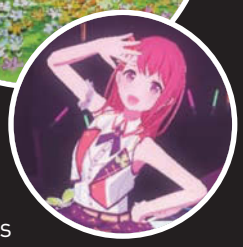

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# editorial

## As the Record Spins

**Hey! This is Patrick and hey!** Welcome to the latest issue of *Otaku USA*. Once again, and since our very first issue way back in 2007, here we are to celebrate the best in anime, manga, games, cosplay, toys, and other fabulous things from Japan: the land of the rising FUN!

What do we have in store for you this time? Well ... *Drugstore in Another World* is our cover feature, and ace writer Kara Dennison offers her take on this popular series. Up next, Jules L. Carrozza tries to make sense out of the mind-bending must-see anime known as *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time*. Following that, Michael Goldstein takes a dip into the aquatic slice of life show that is *The Aquatope on White Sand*. Then, Daryl Surat powers up with mysterious Getter Rays and summons devastating power to deliver his pulse-pounding take on *Getter Robo Arc*. And finally, Kara Dennison returns to our pages, and the isekai genre, with *My Next Life as a Villainess*.

In between these big features, you'll find our usual departments including manga reviews, manga samples, anime reviews, cosplay pics, toy previews, even an angry stone god named Daimajin!

So, what else is going on? Well, right now as I sit writing this, it is nearly mid-October in Tokyo. The weather is definitely starting to cool down after a long hot summer, and I think we are due for yet another rainy season any second now. After a seemingly endless State of Emergency, Tokyo feels like it is getting back to normal—just a little—after Covid countermeasures. Maybe cases will go back up again, maybe not, but you got to make the most of it while you can!

After having completed my latest book, *Crunchyroll Essential Anime: Fan Favorites, Memorable Masterpieces, and Cult Classics* (on sale April 2022 from Hachette Book Group), I needed to recharge my batteries a bit. For the first time in about 18 months, I feel OK about running around town, hitting my usual otaku spots in Shibuya, Nakano, and Akihabara. This time, I have a new obsession: buying old anime soundtracks on vinyl LPs!

Anime soundtracks played a huge part in making me a fan back in my youth. Imports would sometimes pop up in my home state of California, and places like Japan Town in San Francisco used to have their own Japanese record stores. There was something amazing about the packaging on anime soundtrack LPs, whether it was the glossy cover art, color inserts, or sometimes the freebies they came packaged with like posters or stickers. Then, of course, there was the music, which could range from full symphonic works like the *Space Battleship Yamato* series, to the 80s AOR pop sound of *Macross*, to fusions of rock music and traditional Japanese instruments like the *Queen Millennia* soundtrack. Of course, all these sounds (and more!) can be found now on CD or digital-streaming services, but I firmly believe it's just not the same. So here I am, digging through crates of old anime records in the hopes of finding buried treasure (hopefully at a reasonable price).

The latest disc I've been spinning is the soundtrack to the 1985 anime *Dagger of Kamui*, featuring music by Eitetsu Hayashi and Ryudo Uzaki. It's a film from a great director—Rintaro—with great animation from studio Madhouse that is all too little seen outside of Japan, despite it being a great work of ninja anime on par with *Ninja Scroll* or even *Naruto*. By all means, check it out if you should ever cross paths with it!

And by all means, check out the latest (and next!) issue of *Otaku USA* magazine!

—Patrick

# DAIROKU: AGENTS OF SAKURATANI

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TEEN T ESRB

Fantasy Violence
Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol

# LETTERS/**TEGAMI**

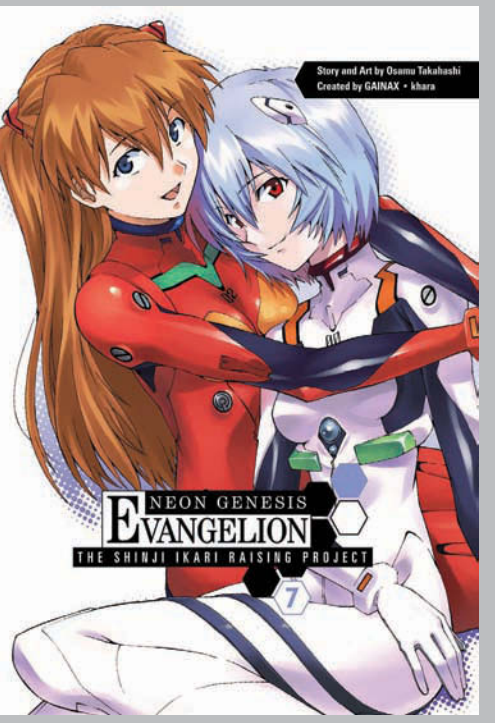
Dear *Otaku USA*, With each passing month, I get increasingly worried about the future of anime. Hollywood and Netflix making changes with their live action adaptations, Sony urging censorship, and the Cancel Culture are but a few of the possibilities of the downfall of the art form we've grown to love.

Sure, manga is still on the rise with publishers like Dark Horse and VIZ outselling the comic book powerhouses. But who knows how long that'll last?

I fear that it's all going to be taken away from us one day.

-William

**Hi William! Thanks for your letter and for letting us know your concerns. To be real honest with you, I wouldn't worry too much about the future of anime. Over the course of running our magazine since 2007 (wow, that's a long time ago!) we've seen huge changes happen across the industry, ranging from the collapse (and rise again) of the manga market, the transition from physical media to streaming, and even world-shaking events like the 3/11 tsunami and the recent Covid-19 pandemic. And you know what? *Japan keeps making anime!* As long as there's an audience, they'll keep making it. As for right now, I'm not sure what some of your favorite titles are, but since you mentioned Dark Horse, here's a pic from one of their *Neon Genesis Evangelion* manga!**




Hi *Otaku USA*! Thank you so much for putting a review of *Resident Evil Village* in the December 2021 magazine! I love this game so much, along with *Resident Evil 7*. I adore the characters in the game, especially Lady Dimitrescu and Karl Heisenberg!

-K

**Hi K! Thanks for your message. We're glad you enjoyed our game review for *Resident Evil Village*. We're also in agreement that you can never have too much Lady Dimitrescu, so we're plastering her pic on this page as well. Enjoy!**

Hello *Otaku USA*! I have a pair of questions for you. Have you published features or reviews about the 2005 anime series *The Snow Queen* and in which issue? Would you consider publishing a complete feature on *Grimm's Fairy Tale Classics* (1988-1989)? It was released earlier this year by Discotek Media. I would like to see more anime nostalgia in *Otaku USA*!

Thank you!

-Panaiot

**Hi Panaiot! Thanks for your letter! Looking back through the archives of our magazine, it looks like we somehow managed to miss covering both *The Snow Queen* and *Grimm's Fairy Tale Classics* in our publication. *The Snow Queen* in particular looks interesting since it was directed by one of our favorites: Osamu Dezaki (*Golgo 13: The Professional*, *Space Adventure Cobra*). It's possible that both of these titles could wind up in our pages someday, but in the meantime, here's a pic from *Grimm's Fairy Tale Classics*. Look for more vintage anime in our magazine soon!**

**And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to otakuusa@gmail.com!**

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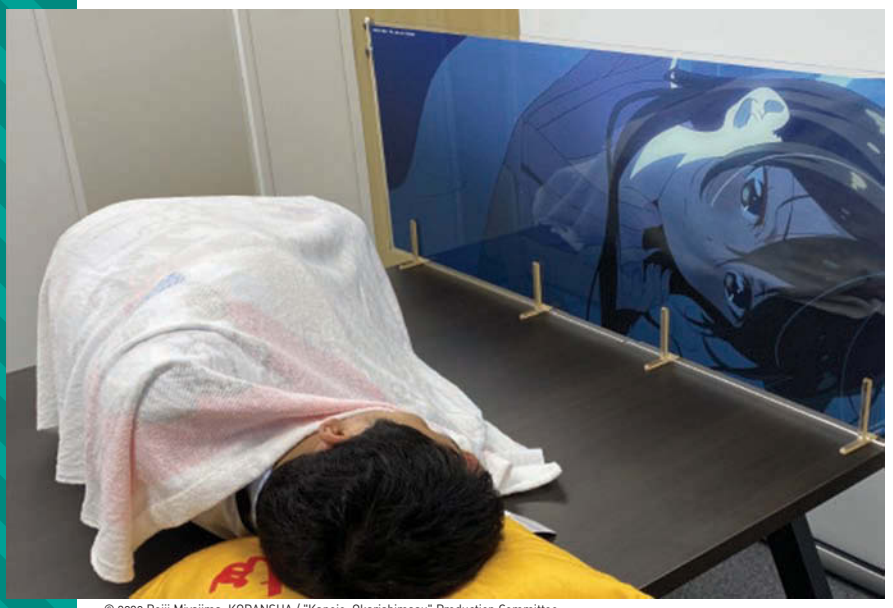
OTAKU ARSENAL By Joseph Luster

# Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle



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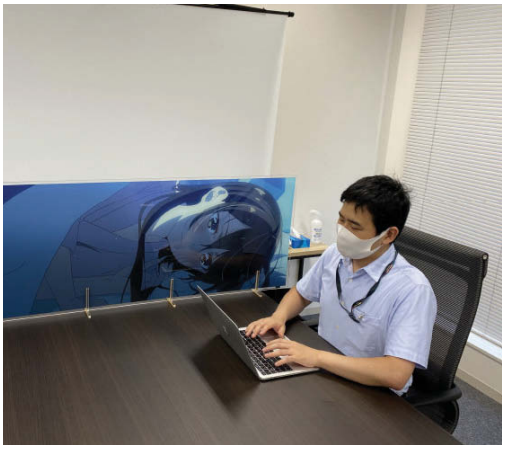
## Get Sleepy With This Life-Size Chizuru from Rent-a-Girlfriend

Have you ever wanted to hang out next to a life-size Chizuru from *Rent-a-Girlfriend*? If so, fans sort of got their chance with a massive new acrylic image of the character, who was up for grabs for anyone lucky enough to win the grand prize of a campaign that included a bunch of *Rent-a-Girlfriend* merch.

The oversized acrylic board measures out at 140cm and can be placed in one's bed or propped up on a massive desk or table for that classic side-sleeping stare. The only way would-be winners were able to score the life-size Chizuru acrylic involved purchasing 10 entries to the campaign's general lottery, priced at ¥880 (about US$8) a pop. There were no discounts for buying in bulk, so the chance came at a pricey ¥8,800 (US$80).



On the bright side, the grand prize of the life-size Chizuru doll was a double-chance prize on top of the other prizes, so there was a chance one could win two grand prizes for their trouble (and expense). In addition to the two Chizuru stands up for grabs, other prizes included everything from towels to smaller acrylic stands, stickers, and smartphone keychains.

## Celebrate a Major Directorial Debut with Future Boy Conan

Everyone got their start somewhere, including one of the most well-known anime directors, Hayao Miyazaki. Before he was creating beloved feature films with Studio Ghibli, he made his directorial debut with the TV anime *Future Boy Conan*, and the series is about to bring its unique and unforgettable adventure to English audiences for the first time in an official capacity.

GKIDS is the distributor behind this one, which includes both a digital download-to-own release and a four-disc Blu-ray of *Future Boy Conan: THE COMPLETE SERIES*. The physical set packs all 26 episodes of the 1978 anime with a 16-page booklet complete with character artwork. As for what you'll find on the discs themselves, the show has been given a fancy 4K digital restoration and an optional new English dub, making for the ideal way to experience anime history and add to your collection of classics.

*Future Boy Conan: THE COMPLETE SERIES* hits shelves on November 16.

© NIPPON ANIMATION CO., LTD.

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## JUJUTSU KAISEN Molds Let You Chow Down on Fingers

Popping a cursed Sakuna finger down your gullet might be a good idea if you're Yuji Itadori from *JUJUTSU KAISEN*, and even then it's questionable. The rest of us will have to be content with not eating cursed fingers, but if you're hung up on the experience you can simulate it thanks to some molds from Premium Bandai.

Whether you're looking to make bizarre ice cubes or set out some chocolate delights that all of your guests will tilt their heads at, these molds will get the job done in startlingly convincing style. Add an almond or another type of nut to fill in the fingernail and you have a truly off-putting but delicious treat on your hands! The Sakuna finger molds are currently priced at ¥3,780 (about US$34) via Premium Bandai's online shop, and they've got their fingers firmly pointed at a January 2022 release window.

## Miku is Forever in Hatsune Miku: COLORFUL STAGE!

© SEGA/ © Colorful Palette Inc. / © Crypton Future Media, INC.

Virtual idols come and go, but Hatsune Miku is forever. The Vocaloid superstar proved this once again during this year's birthday occasion in August, which saw the reveal of plans to bring another game over to western audiences this year. This time it's *Project SEKAI COLORFUL STAGE! Feat. Hatsune Miku*, which is coming to mobile devices in the west as *Hatsune Miku: COLORFUL STAGE!* sometime in 2021. Heck, it might even sneak its way

onto iOS and Android devices by the time this issue is in your hands!

It's clear from the title alone that SEGA knows Hatsune Miku isn't one to be relegated to the "featuring" part of a title, at least not when it's time to bring her latest game out globally. In addition to Miku, *COLORFUL STAGE!* features virtual singers like Kagamine Rin, Kagamine Len, Megurine Luka, KAITO and MEIKO, as well as a cast of 20 original characters split into five bands with their own musical styles and backstories. You'll even be able to participate in virtual live performances with your favorite in-game bands, earn rewards through online events, and more, so keep an eye out for this one if you fancy yourself a virtual star, as well.

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# Jujutsu Kaisen x S.H.Figuarts!

The unstoppable manga-anime juggernaut known as *Jujutsu Kaisen* has catapulted into the S.H.Figuarts line! Four characters from Gege Akutami's smash hit series in all are either already in stores or set to arrive soon, promising incredible posability and bold action limited only by your imagination!

The Satoru Gojo figure features extreme articulation designed to capture poses just like seen on-screen. He also includes optional hands for replicating the "infinity" and a fun un-blindfolded option head! Megumi Fushiguro is slated to arrive in stores starting in January 2022 and is set to include optional hands for letting you replicate his Divine Dogs, Nue, and Domain Expansion techniques. He includes an optional Sukuna face for use with the S.H.Figuarts Yuji Itadori figure. Finally there's a Yuji Itadori as well, boasting the line's trademark posability and effect parts for re-creating Itadori's "Divergent Fist" technique. It also includes optional hands for displaying as possessed by Ryomen Sukuna!

For more information, check out the S.H.Figuarts official website via **www.tamashiinations.com**!

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# Flowers of Evil: Complete Collection

## Not-quite realism

**STUDIO/COMPANY**
Sentai Filmworks

**RATING**
TV-MA

Takao Kasuga is a curious fellow. He loves two things: Charles Baudelaire and classmate Nanako Saeki. He seems particularly detached from the real world, quoting literature and fiercely defending his crush from classmates' lewd remarks. He's never found without his battered old copy of Baudelaire's "Les fleurs du mal", his favorite book (and namesake of the series). This doesn't do him any favors as far as his classmates are concerned.

Kasuga is understandably feeling ostracized and as though no one his age is in tune at all with his hopes and desires. It seems the only shining light in his life is Saeki, and it's painfully obvious from he's clearly a youth at risk of heading down a decidedly reckless and violent path. That's the direction the bizarre but intriguing *Flowers of Evil* takes you in from the moment you view the first episode throughout the very end.

Enter resident weirdo Sawa Nakamura. She butts heads with her teacher in front of an astonished class as he admonishes her for having the lowest test score. Her rebuttal is a colorful bit of profanity, which lands her a meeting in the faculty office after school. It's in stark contrast to the almost surreal yet peaceful tone of the rest of the episode, and you wonder why Nakamura, when it's apparent she has few friends, attempts to further alienate others through these actions. And of course, she and Kasuga are drawn to each other like some weird, perverted moths to a disgusting flame. Little by little, the more the pair spend time together, the more Nakamura

humiliates and pushes Kasuga, who feels trapped in their "friendship," but doesn't dare shy away from it.

*Flowers of Evil* is much like a car crash in that you can't look away, as all of the decisions that went into bringing it to life must have been geared solely toward crafting a series meant to force viewers to come away questioning their decision. And it's all the better for it. First, there's the elephant in the room: it was animated using rotoscoping, where animators draw over and animate on top of live-action footage. And while it's a distinctive style that allows for interesting effects, it also adds a creep factor that's disturbing (and ugly) on many levels.

The characters look nothing like their manga counterparts. Most of the time in wide shots there are faceless people walking around. And the not-quite realism reaches "uncanny valley" scariness. As a connoisseur of the creepy I could appreciate how this enhanced and even created tension of its own, especially the dreamlike, hazy bits where Kasuga related bits of literature, as though he were floating away to another world—but many won't, making it a polarizing decision that will unfortunately push many away.

It's almost like a trippy, drug-laden retelling of the manga as a horror story, albeit completely unintentional. Zexcs made an interesting call here—it will alienate viewers and scare off those who decide to try it. If the nearly static OP animation isn't enough to bore or frighten in the first few moments, then the disconcerting ED will: distorted childlike speech patterns and simple repetition. It's nightmare fuel on its own, and comes in at an especially jarring moment.

And unlike the manga, it moves at a very slow, deliberate pace. It's plodding, obtuse, and at times quite boring, whereas in stark contrast the manga series seemed to move at an almost breakneck pace, where there was more time to learn and understand the machinations of Kasuga's personality and his intentions, which seemed to have been intentionally obscured in the anime, perhaps on purpose.

*Flowers of Evil* is a bizarre watch all around, but will undoubtedly appeal to many looking for something decidedly different in a world of same-y series and isekai shows. But it isn't accessible by any means, and if you want to appreciate it, you're going to need to give it some room to breathe.

—Brittany Vincent

© Shuzo Oshimi/Kodansha/[The Flowers of Evil] Production Committee

# Shaman King

## A decidedly more accurate affair

STUDIO/COMPANY
Netflix

RATING
TV-PG

*Shaman King* was always an oft-underlooked part of the shonen anime circuit. While shows like *Yu Yu Hakusho* and *Dragon Ball Z* pulled in massive audiences, *Shaman King* was content to settle in the shadows and attract its own loyal audience. Still, despite a somewhat lukewarm reception from mainstream manga fans, it did manage to run in *Weekly Shonen Jump* for quite some time, and received its own anime adaptation. The first run, 64 episodes long, ran from 2001 to 2002.

Now, it's 2021, and *Shaman King* has been resurrected, somewhat ironically, for another chance at courting viewers with a new anime series. This time, it's been crafted with a much more critical eye toward faithfully adapting the lengthy manga and giving the characters time to breathe. Unfortunately, while most aspects of the series have indeed improved since the initial anime iteration, even the new *Shaman King* suffers from a similar malady as the first: it simply isn't doing anything terribly exciting.

*Shaman King* follows the young but plucky Yoh

© Hiroyuki Takei/Kodansha/Shaman King Project/TV Tokyo

# Kageki Shojo!!

## Straddling a precarious balance

STUDIO/COMPANY
Funimation

RATING
TV-14

The world of traditional Japanese theater is one that has generally not been one to get a lot of notice in the West. Different styles like Kabuki, Noh and Rakugo have gotten some shows out of Japan but not too nearly as much, it is often through anime that we can experience some of these forms of traditional theater, and, in the case of *Kageki Shojo!!* the great form of theater known as takarazuka.

Takarazuka is a form of musical theater in which all of the parts, male and female, are performed by women. Often done in a revue style, it has done performances of western theater, Japanese stories, and they've done work even based on popular anime such as Lupin the 3rd. In fact, as this is being written, there is a takarazuka performance of the 1980's City Hunter anime being done that this reviewer very much wishes they could see.

In the case of *Kageki Shojo!!* Sarasa, an eccentric and extremely tall takarazuka hopeful, has joined the Kouka School in the hopes of becoming part of the prestigious Kouka Revue. Because of her height she hopes to become one of the "otoko-yaku" or actresses chosen to play male roles, something the school is famous for. She's a huge fan of the takarazuka staple *The*

©Kumiko Saiki, HAKUSENSHA/Kageki Shojo!! Production Committee

Asakura, who has a special gift: seeing and communicating with the dead—particularly, the spirit of a samurai warrior named Amidamaru. Yoh and Amidamaru combat in knock-down, drag-out battles against others who can communicate with spirits and their companions as well. Their goal? To be the very best, like no one ever was, of course, and compete in the Shaman Fight for a chance to be crowned *Shaman King*.

Along his journey, Yoh meets a variety of friends along the way, including buddy Manta Oyamada and Yoh's fiancé Anna Kyoyama. He's faced with the typical sticky situations you'd expect of a shounen series, such as enemies of the day and the fights that break out between them. These include Red Tao, a Chinese shaman who wants to steal Amidamaru away, a martial arts star that uses a sealing talisman in battle, and even a descendant of Faust looking to resurrect his wife.

These fights are generally entertaining and done well enough, and for the most part serves up a very faithful adaptation of the manga. One of the most intriguing parts of the entire shebang is by far the care that went into dressing each character and outfitting them with looks that match their personalities. The enemies are intriguing as well, though their fights always turn out in the most predictable manner possible.

The animation is a much more intricate affair this time as well. While there are a number of repetitive animations as well as clearly recycled bits and shortcuts throughout, it's clear some love and care did go into making an exciting new adaptation, much like the new *Hunter X Hunter* series and what went into bringing that to life.

Overall, it's a decidedly more accurate affair, and those concerned about the new version hurtling toward the completely unrelated second half of the series like the first anime did don't have anything to worry about, clearly. *Shaman King* is barreling along at a decent clip and is working to become to definitive anime adaptation the manga fans deserved. But while it does what it set out to do well, it's doubtful that there's really a place for yet another combat-laden shounen romp in 2021, where they're a dime a dozen—and done much better and more convincingly, especially with shows like *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *My Hero Academia* to opt for viewing instead. It's a nostalgic throwback for sure, but don't expect this old dog to have learned any particularly new tricks in its absence. Still, if you continue to be entertained by said tricks, you'll find something to like here.

—Brittany Vincent

*Rose of Versailles* and even keeps a poster of Lady Oscar on her wall. Sarasa's roommate is Ai Narata, known as Naracchi, an ex-idol from the group JPX48, famous for being "graduated" because she called a fan creepy at an event. Ai's emotional and public condemnation of a fan made her a public figure in a way she didn't want. Ai has, therefore, decided to remove men from her life and what better way of doing that than joining the all famous Kouka School? Ai has also become emotionally guarded, not allowing anyone to get close and purposely not wanting to make any friends.

Things don't get much better for Ai when she finds out that her roommate is going to be the loud and annoying Sarasa who destroys the curtain separating their two halves of the room in the first few minutes of living together (college roommates right?). It gets significantly worse for Ai when her fan that indirectly got her expelled from her idol career shows up at the school.

*Kageki Shoujo!!* is the rare sort of show that defies expectations again and again in very good ways. Every character in the show is well fleshed out and with backgrounds and pathos to match. Ai and Sarasa never feel one-dimensional, and every episode expands on their characters and their relationship. The supporting cast is equally excellent with a notably fine performance by the always amazing Norio Wakamoto as one of the school's instructors. Ai's fan and stalker is presented as a creepy, weird otaku, but, again, the show gives him room to grow and shows that there's more to him and how terrible he feels for what he did to her career.

While *Kageki Shoujo!!* is mostly a comedy, it delves into some extremely dark areas involving such things as child abuse, so those with sensitive dispositions to such content may want to tread carefully, however, none of it is exploitative and all of it is dealt with maturity, realism and importance that such things should. This follows in the tradition of other theatrical anime like *Glass Mask* and *Revue Starlight*—man, what is it with anime and making excellent shows about the theater? *Kageki Shojo!!* manages to surprise at every turn with some scenes playing out with a ridiculous farce, but never inappropriate for the scene.

*Kageki Shojo!!* has quickly become one of the best shows of the season and whether you're a theater kid (like me even if I didn't do musicals) or not it's absolutely worth your time and is a fine addition to the world of "theatrical anime".

—Gerald Rathkolb

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# Godzilla Singular Point

## Straddling a precarious balance

**STUDIO/COMPANY**
Netflix

**RATING**
13+

When the broadcast of an enigmatic Indian pop song inspires ghost sightings and triggers decades-old protocols at an obscure research facility, Yun Arikawa, an electronics shop employee, and Mei Kamino, a graduate student studying hypothetical life-forms, get swept up in a world-spanning adventure involving shady mega-corporations, hyper-advanced temporal physics, and the legacy of a brilliant-but-eccentric scientist who disappeared ages ago. Thus begins *Godzilla Singular Point*, a 13-episode Netflix Original anime series with direction by Atsushi Takahashi, screenplays by Toh EnJoe, and animation production by BONES and Orange. A brain-busting, globe-trotting caper involving miraculous trans-dimensional materials, galaxy-sized super computers, time travel, artificial intelligence, and sinister dinosaur bones, *Godzilla Singular Point* is an ambitious attempt to fuse the old-fashioned creature feature sensibilities of Toho's Showa Era giant monster films with the hipper, slicker edge of Reiwa Era hard science fiction. Does the series achieve this lofty goal? Yes and no.

*Godzilla Singular Point* is cool but cold. The large cast of characters have a lot of personality but very little depth. We never learn much about Yun, Mei, and their colleagues apart from how they react to the probability of an imminent, capital 'C' Catastrophe. Their behavior is invariably clinical and precise as they wrestle with problems of world-shattering proportions. Their actions are brainy but emotionally detached,

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and it's not just the main characters that behave this way. The entire world seems strangely unconcerned with the arrival of Rodan, Manda, Anguirus, Godzilla, and new-comer Salunga (pronounced "Sharanga" in the English dub) even when these extra-dimensional monsters wreak ecological devastation on an unprecedented scale. The city of Tokyo being transformed into a swirling hell-scape of crimson dust ought to merit a reaction stronger than mild inconvenience from the human cast. Ironically, the only cast member who experiences significant growth and character development is Jet Jaguar, a humanoid robot built to counter the monster threat.

The pacing of *Godzilla Singular Point* is tight and snappy, but the tone is scattershot, straddling a precarious balance between serious and silly. The dangers posed by the kaiju, the Singular Points, and the Ashihara Catastrophe are cataclysmic, but they never feel grounded or real, because they're encased in a layer of techno-babble that only grows thicker and more abstruse as the series progresses. The possibility of death is also an inconsistent proposition: at one-point, a major character is dispatched with what feels like a dismissive flick of screenwriter Toh EnJoe's pen. Their demise was so abrupt that at first I thought my streaming service had accidentally skipped a scene. At other times, characters survive impossibly lethal scenarios without so much as a scratch.

Even after watching it twice, I'm unsure what to make of *Godzilla Singular Point*. I appreciate its reverence for Toho's Showa Era giant monster films, and I admire its dedication to presenting a fast-paced, hard science fiction adventure story bursting with big ideas and unapologetic kaiju weirdness.

But after the initial novelty wears off, the show's steadfast refusal to engage emotionally with its own material transforms the later half of the series into a slog. It's also hard to recommend *Godzilla Singular Point* to rank-and-file Godzilla fans, since Godzilla is barely present in it. The Big G doesn't make a proper appearance until Episode 10, and even then Godzilla remains more of a metaphor than a character in its own right. Ultimately, *Godzilla Singular Point* is a story whose reach exceeds its grasp.

Even though it concludes with a post-credits sequence that teases more mad science shenanigans to come with the advent of one of my favorite monsters in the Toho Studios stable, I can't recommend *Godzilla Singular Point* to the casual viewer. For a show with such a steep learning curve and such hyper-focused attention to detail on difficult science fiction concepts, only the hardest of hard-core giant monster movie fans need apply.

—Paul Thomas Chapman

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# Arion: Collector's Edition

## When Gundam Meets Hades

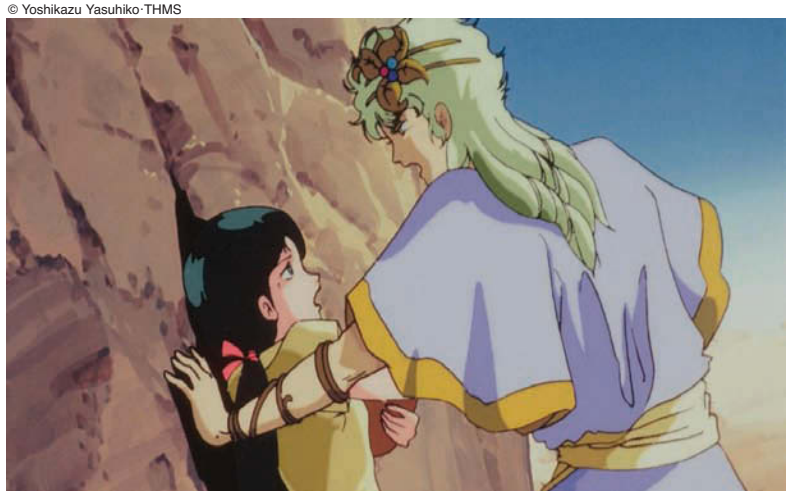
**STUDIO/COMPANY**
Discotek Media

**RATING**
14+

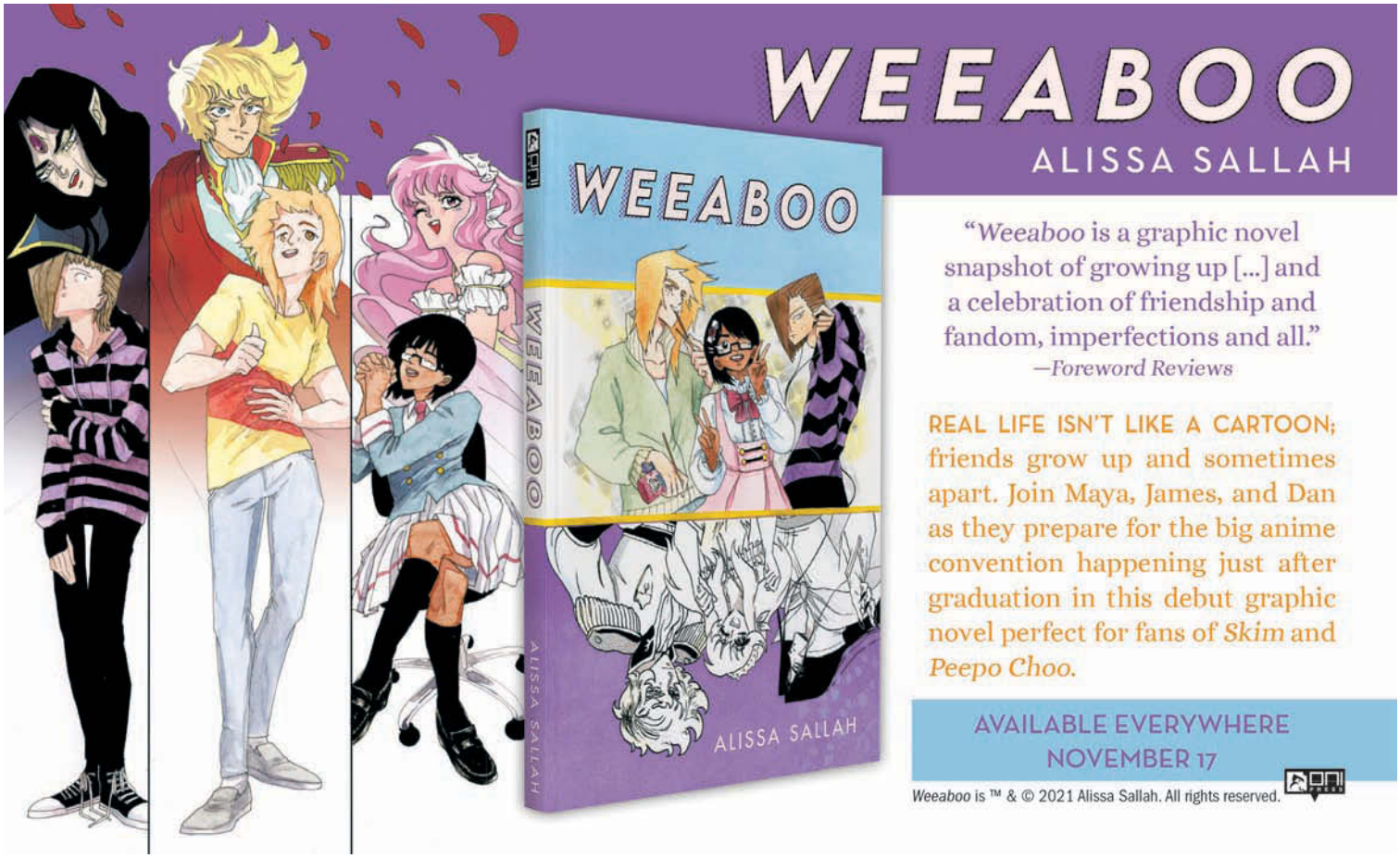
The "great anime titles we'll never see released in the U.S." list continues to shrink, because after 35 years of waiting—easy to write, but try LIVING it—it has finally happened: for the first time ever, the Greek mythology inspired *Neo Heroic Fantasia Arion* is legally available in the USA, subtitled in English ... and there's a good chance you've never heard of it.

That's not your fault. The legendary artist and animator Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (aka "YAS"), best known as one of the principal architects behind the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*, approached his animated works with auteur levels of ownership. Not only did he direct 1986's *Arion* after creating the source manga, YAS also wrote, character designed, and handled animation direction and corrections (so he practically drew much of it). And yet, just as with *Crusher Joe* before and *The Venus Wars* after, despite strong fan reception YAS saw flaws in *Arion* the rest of us could not perceive. Unsatisfied with the end results and the lack of pre-release publicity, Yasuhiko quit animation and forbade the release of his films even in Japan. I can only surmise that the strong reception to *Gundam: The Origin* led him to finally change his ways, just in time for a new generation of anime fans to have their interests in Greek mythology sparked from repeated playthoughs of the videogame *Hades*.

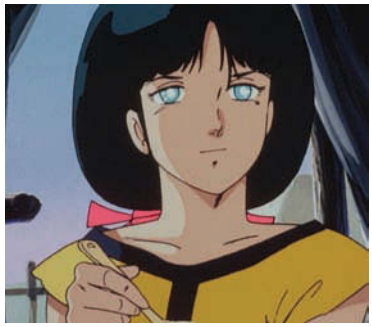
© Yoshikazu Yasuhiko·THMS



*Arion* is set in a time before the gods were separated from mankind, which is YAS's way of saying "I'm just going to use these characters and tell whatever story I want" in keeping with the fact that most recorded myths were made up on the fly by inebriated poets/bards to enter-

tain inebriated listeners. Although the *Arion* of myth was an immortal horse that maybe had wings and maybe also talked, THIS *Arion* is the humanoid son of the blind goddess Demeter. As divine brothers Zeus and Poseidon vie for control of the surface world, the eldest brother Hades spirits *Arion* away to the underworld, bestows *Arion* with an exquisite blade, and issues a quest: slay Zeus to restore Demeter's eyesight!



This sets *Arion* upon an epic journey in which the pantheon of Olympian gods gets slaughtered wholesale, and due to YAS's unmistakable character designs they come off like the cast of *Mobile Suit Gundam* wearing fabulous outfits. OBVIOUSLY, Apollo is going to be up to no good; he looks just like Char Aznable! That might also explain why he's got a thing for the rather young lady Resphoina (probably meant to be named "Despoina"), a mute attendant for Apollo's younger sister Athena. Athena, by the way, has the hots for her brother Apollo, because Greek myths were laden with every single "content warning" you can think of. *Arion* contains child nudity, adult nudity, incestuous longings, animal murder, psychedelic hallucinations, and couplings which certain Internet fandoms charitably refer to as "non con." Perhaps THAT is why we needed to wait 35 years; it took this much time for that stuff to become so COMMONPLACE in anime that its mild presence here barely fazed me!

Discotek's release looks phenomenal compared to those ancient VHS bootlegs, and the extras are a treat for 1980s anime fans. In addition to trailers and promo videos, a making-of featurette from 1985 features all sorts of vintage fashion, location scouting, interviews, and future Studio Ghibli composer Joe Hisaishi composing *Arion*'s score using the same computer he must have used for his prior *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. You also get multiple art galleries consisting of key art, model sheets, and the phenomenal backgrounds.

As a 2-hour distillation of a lengthy manga, *Arion* is a bit light on characterization and several events feel rushed. The same is true of *The Venus Wars*, really, but on pure artistic merit, *Arion* remains an achievement for the ages especially when you consider how much of it was primarily done by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko himself. For this alone *Arion* deserves to be seen, and now you finally can.

—Daryl Surat

# SHIROBAKO The Movie

## Lights, camera, action!

**STUDIO/COMPANY**
Shout! Factory

**RATING**
13+

Aoi Miyamori along with her four best friends—Ema Yasuhara, Shizuka Sakaki, Misa Todo, and Midori Imai—have held on to the aspiration of creating the latest, hottest anime that will inspire the next generation of fans since high school. Two and half years after graduation, it looks like that aspiration is becoming reality. They've gone their separate ways and into different fields of specialty. Aoi, in particular, ends up joining Musashino Animation as a production assistant, while her friend Ema Yasuhara becomes a key animator at the same company.

But as Aoi quickly learns, you don't get to experience a good dream without going through a few nightmares first. Between following the harsh advice from her several bosses, ensuring that key animators finish their work on time, and correcting the mistakes of her fellow production runner, that dream has been replaced by brutal stress and constant freak-outs. It turns out that the limit is actually next Wednesday, because that's when she needs to meet a particular deadline, lest the company's latest project go up in flames.

This is the heart of *SHIROBAKO*, the popular fall 2014 dramedy anime directed by Tsutomu Mizushima (the man behind hits like *Squid Girl* and *Girls und Panzer*) and animated by P.A. Works. Right away, *SHIROBAKO* distinguishes itself from most anime by simply being about, well, anime! The concept of the anime—a show set in a real-life work environment—is not in itself original, but at the same time, you'd be hard-pressed to find any element that handles the whole procedure of producing an anime, warts and all, completely straight. And for the record, none of the have the door yet; they ARE a part of the industry, so to a lot of folks watching from the outside, they've made it.

This down-to-earth process returns in the surprise feature film sequel titled, um, *Shirobako*, which has the whole crew dipping their feet into a theatrical film project, and just a few months before the deadline, not to mention the clash taking place between making an original film and the corporate meddling breathing down their necks. If any of this sounds familiar to you, that's because it kind of is, as it's really more or less a condensed rehash of the prequel series. And while I wouldn't necessarily call it bad, the film can never quite escape that familiar feeling that we've been down this road before.

Its visual execution as well doesn't exactly scream "excellence," and it'd be easy to write it off as the weakest part of the show. My guess is that's the whole point; I mean, how much flash and how many explosions can you put into a show that's meant to resemble real life before it's no longer considered realistic? The visuals aren't really the concern, here, because it's not really about the art; it's about the people the art is portraying, and everything else is only drawn to punctuate that aesthetic. Still, it gets the job done, and there's at least enough visual personality that offers no real reason for criticism.

Not only that, but *Shirobako* seems to aim for a fairytale ending rather than acting as an actual documentary of the anime industry, which I get, because it's more like a workplace dramedy than anything. But this pursuit of a happy ending feels a little too easy, especially since much of this material treads on similar ground to the previous series. No matter how strong everything else is, the payoff feels a little stale.

That being said, *Shirobako* is still a film I'd be glad to recommend, not because it's an anime about making anime, but rather because of its emphasis on the characters and them pushing through trial after trial before they can find happiness. It still reaffirms the original anime's affirmation of perseverance for a happy ending and the power of art to unite us all.

—Michael Goldstein

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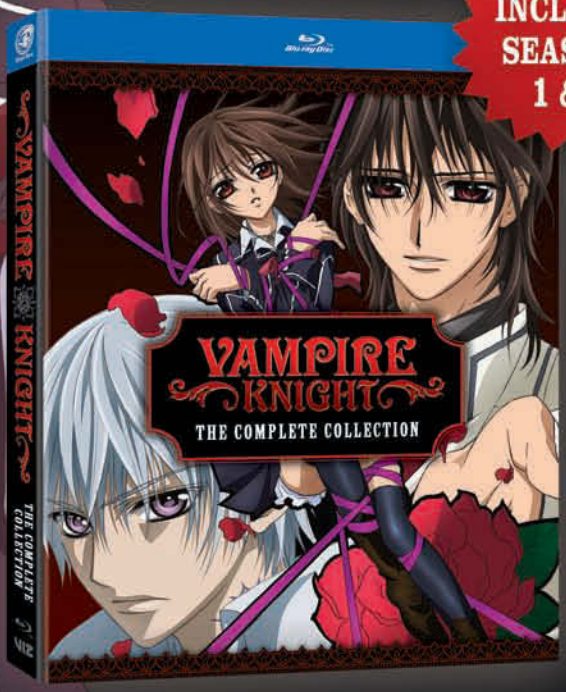


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# New Manga Reviews, Extra Cat Edition

## New Manga Reviews

**PUBLISHER**
Seven Seas Entertainment

**STORY AND ART**
Miwako Sugiyama

**RATING**
OT

### Bite Maker: The King's Omega

In the author's notes in the back pages of *Bite Maker: The King's Omega*, Miwako Sugiyama explains that it was her editor's idea to create the first Omegaverse shojo manga. Depending on how wisely you've lived your life, your reaction to the previous sentence is either "yes, excellent idea," "no, terrible idea," "does that mean it's heterosexual, and why would anyone do that?" or "what the hell is Omegaverse?"

Put as simply as possible, Omegaverse is a category of fanfic that began in the U.S. but has now officially gone worldwide. It can be about anything but must take place in a universe where people are genetically divided into sexually dominant and irresistible "alphas," normal "betas," and "omegas," who are submissive and often have extreme sexual chemistry with alphas. In recent years, Omegaverse fiction has exploded in popularity in the fanfic community, leaked into legit romance publishing, and inspired a drama-filled lawsuit over ownership of this peculiarly specific concept.

Or, as Sugiyama more succinctly explains, "It's a horny story where instincts conflict with self-control (in everyone)."

So. *Bite Maker* introduces readers to Nobunaga, an arrogant alpha so hot he can control people, regardless of gender or sexuality, through sheer horniness. "If you see Nobunaga without training or immunity to him," his willing servants warn, "his pheromones will drive you **crazy!**" Though he acts like an asshole, he's secretly looking for his soulmate ... to impregnate her with his alpha "seed," which makes his desire a bit less hearts-and-flowers romantic. Nobunaga attends a high school with other alphas, because their intense sexual pull makes it dangerous for them to be around non-alpha students, and also so the manga can take place in one of those stereotypical ultra-elite academies where everyone is gorgeous and rich and the student council rules like French

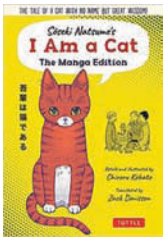
© 2019 Miwako SUGIYAMA.

aristocracy before the guillotines came out.

Meanwhile, across town, Noel hides her blossoming beauty behind glasses and a ponytail so no one will realize she's a rare omega, "an endangered gender" (Omegaverse scoffs at biological plausibility!). She meets Nobunaga while rescuing a friend from his hormonal control, and the two feel a sexual kismet so powerful that Noel passes out after a single kiss. Noel is determined not to let her instincts get the better of her, but, we're warned, "the alphas will soon be in rut."

This is not erotica for readers who are squicked by consent issues. Everyone in this reality is driven to sex, often against their rational will, and people under an alpha's hormonal control become creepily compliant zombies. It's also not for readers whose eyes glaze over when a fantasy manga starts listing its rules and stats; like a lot of Omegaverse fiction, *Bite Maker* spends significant time laying out precisely how its version of the trope works, down to minute details (an alpha, for example, is required to have three servants who act as his secretarial staff/cheer squad, because reasons).

But for readers who are into this kind of thing, *Bite Maker* delivers plenty of sexy scenarios, and Sugiyama is great at drawing attractive people in the throes of passion. The translation has some fun with the dialogue: "Noel's brought a super-hot evil prince home!!" Those of you inclined to submit to the attractions of Omegaverse, you know who you are, and you know you can't resist. (Shaenon K. Garrity)




**PUBLISHER**
Tuttle Publishing

**STORY AND ART**
Chiroru Kobato

**RATING**
All Ages

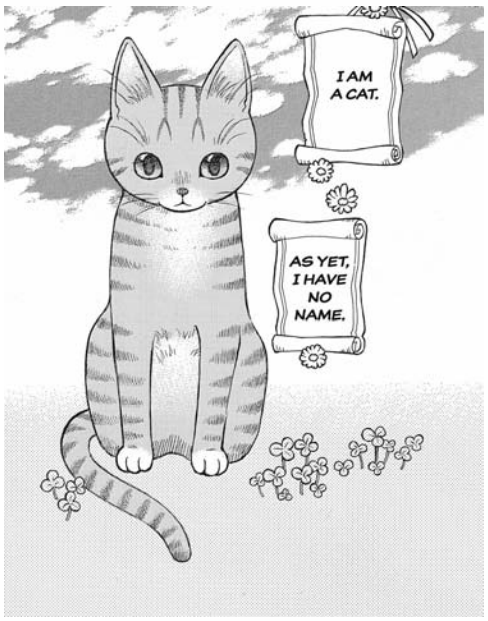
## Sōseki Natsume's I Am a Cat: The Manga Edition

Sōseki Natsume's turn-of-the-century novel *I Am a Cat* is the most loveable Japanese classic. The cat, the unnamed pet of a misanthropic, self-centered English teacher (Sōseki was an English scholar and translator), observes the goings-on in his household and the surrounding neighborhood. As the episodic novel continues, it becomes a satire focused on the teacher, Kushami, and his social circle of would-be intellectuals, with the cat providing sardonic feline commentary on human vanity and ambition. So beloved is the author that he's traditionally called by his given name, Sōseki, rather than his surname, suggesting that every reader sees him as a very dear friend.

Chiroru Kobato's manga adaptation faithfully reproduces episodes from the novel. *I Am a Cat* was originally serialized in a magazine, with each chapter more or less standing on its own, so there's little in the way of plot. The strongest story thread in the manga involves the efforts of Kushami's younger male friends to woo and marry Tomiko, the narcissistic daughter of rich snobs. In between, Sōseki pokes fun at pseudo-intellectualism and the academic world with satirical conversations that may not translate well to modern readers but are still amusingly absurd: a grad student has a thesis project on frog eyeballs that requires him to make countless tiny glass balls, a poet dreams of producing an *avant-garde* "haiku-play" consisting of a woman bathing onstage ("How decadent!"), and Kushami lectures on the evils of women while his wife, housekeeper, and three adorable daughters put up with his moodiness.

Disappointingly, the manga doesn't stretch beyond drily reproducing events and conver-

© Chiroru Kobato. English language edition published by Tuttle Publishing.



sations. It can be difficult to adapt literary satire and preserve the humor and tone—think of the many Jane Austen films that keep the romance but ditch the arch wit, or the adaptations that turn *Gulliver's Travels* into a simple adventure story—and the *I Am a Cat* manga doesn't make much effort. The action consists mostly of people talking in Kushami's house, and though Kobato swaps up poses and layouts to avoid drawing nothing but pages of talking heads, she never finds a way to visually express why these conversations are funny or what the reader is supposed to make of them. Her art is pleasant and workmanlike, not up to capturing the nuances of a book whose appeal depends on subtle turns of humor, emotion, and poetry.

The cat is drawn realistically as a cute tabby, usually watching the humans with a blank face. It would be going too far to turn him into a Garfield-type cartoon character, but a design that allowed more visible emotion would help sell the humor and make him feel like an active character. The few sequences that focus on the cat's own adventures—he samples human food and alcohol and falls in love with a neighbor's pretty calico—are some of the more memorable sections of the manga.

Without the distinctive narrative voice of the novel, *I Am a Cat* simply doesn't have enough cat. That said, the stories and characters remain entertaining, and Kobato draws well-researched period details and clothing, capturing a fast-changing era in Japan when kimonos rubbed shoulders with bespoke European suits. The manga provides an introduction for readers who may not yet be ready to tackle Sōseki's brilliant but very long and sometimes challengingly dated novel. And, hey, the cat is cute. (Shaenon K. Garrity)

**PUBLISHER**
Digital Manga Publishing
**STORY AND ART**
sono
**RATING**
OT

## SHWD

Sawada, a slim blonde who trains relentlessly to build a set of Linda-Hamilton-in-*T2* arms, is the only woman at the Tokyo branch of Special Hazardous Waste Disposal. That changes when she's joined by new recruit Koga, a gentle, feminine woman who's built like an industrial refrigerator. In no time they're partners, fast friends, and maybe more. Oh, and Special Hazardous Waste Disposal is a government organization dedicated to killing monsters called Dynamis that drive people insane. So there's a lot of on-the-job stress.

*SHWD* is a fast-paced blend of kaiju action, horror, and will-they-or-won't-they bonding between hot, muscular ladies. The Dynamis

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are interesting monsters. Created as bioweapons for an unexplained past war, they move slowly and unleash psychic attacks: "It's an agonizing feeling, like a filthy hand is rummaging through your mind and soul." To take them on, members of the SHWD have to train physically and mentally.

Not that we see much of other members of the SHWD; the focus is entirely on Sawada and Koga, isolated as the only women in the field. Sawada worries about losing her femininity, repeatedly warning Koga, "Don't let them take away what makes you a woman." But beyond that, she doesn't put up with any nonsense. When Koga suggests using guns against the Dynamis, Sawada shrugs, "It's faster to smash their heads with a knife, anyway."

The art is sketchy and uneven, looking especially awkward when it tries to be sexy; a trip to a bathhouse is wedged in to provide fanservice but just shows off the artist's awkwardness at drawing breasts. Still, the characters' expressions and body language are solid, and the Dynamis are simple-looking but appropriately unsettling.

Unfortunately, the Digital Manga ebook volumes are only 40 to 50 pages long, barely enough to get into the story before it ends. It's

a choppy reading experience, and at $7 an ebook, it can get expensive fast. *SHWD* deserves better than a presentation seemingly designed to turn readers off. Despite the so-so art, it's a fun mix of fighting, flirting, and scares, with great chemistry between the leads. (Shaenon K. Garrity)

**PUBLISHER**
Kodansha Comics

**STORY AND ART**
Kaori Yuki

**RATING**
16+

## Beauty and the Beast of Paradise Lost

Mistress of gothic fantasy Kaori Yuki (*Godchild, Fairy Cube*) remains true to form with this dark fairy tale retelling. *Beauty and the Beast* has the trademark Yuki stamps of psychological horror, demons, and strangeness at every turn. Belle is a young girl when a demon known as the Beast attacks her mother. The Beast abducts beautiful women and steals their faces, leaving their mutilated corpses for the villagers to find. Belle's father blames his daughter, already an outcast because of her light violet hair, for her mother's death. He locks Belle away until, years later, the Beast returns. Convinced her mother is still alive, Belle escapes her home to confront the monster. What she finds is not one, but two demonic creatures. One is intent on killing her, while the other saves her life. Spirited away to a castle that travels through space and time, Belle is trapped in the Beast's castle along with his cursed servants and sister.

© Kaori Yuki/ Kodansha Ltd.

The theme of beauty—whether it signifies goodness or disguises evil—forms the central pillar of this fractured fairy tale. The plot takes fascinating twists and turns as it unfolds like a surreal fever dream. As in the original story, the Beast may not be as bad as he seems. Lurking in the wings is the true villain, a woman obsessed with beauty. Meanwhile, the Beast faces threats from within his castle and without. Secrets pile upon secrets in this compulsively readable tale of magic, beauty, and evil.

Art-wise, Yuki never disappoints. The linework is less sketchy than in her early work, but it's still instantly recognizable by its confident inking, elaborate character designs, and skillfully applied screentones that enhance the mood of every scene. The characters are all unique and interesting, and Yuki shows off her love of weirdness with the castles' cursed inhabitants, including a trickster bird named Giselle who nearly leads Belle to her death, the clock-headed keeper of a strange garden, and two bantering cat maids. The story never slows down while adding layers of character development. This richly-drawn, fast-paced dark fantasy is impossible to put down. **Recommended.** (Che Gilson)

**PUBLISHER**
Udon

**STORY**
MAGES/Chiyo St. Inc.

**ART**
Taka Himeno

**RATING**
16+

## Steins;Gate 0

*Steins;Gate 0* is a complex tale of time travel involving multiple timelines, World War III, and a shadowy organization known as SERN that seems to control the fate of infinite worlds. It's not an easy book to get into. By necessity, Volume One introduces numerous characters, a basic plot, and a lot of infodumps on all of the above. The book serves as both a sequel *and* prequel to the *Steins;Gate* visual novel, but sci-fi fans who missed the game should be able to catch up through the manga version.

Just introducing the characters and plot takes up a good chunk of the oversized Volume One, which combines the first three

books of the Japanese edition into a single 426-page omnibus. Those who have played the game or read the light novels may find it frustrating to go over the same territory again. Rintaro Okabe and his fellow time travelers from the Future Gadget Lab are lying low in the year 2010 of the Beta World Line. After failing to avert the tragic deaths of two women he cares for, his childhood friend Mayuri and the genius scientist Kurisu, Okabe has all but given up on trying to change the timeline. Though haunted by PTSD and hoping for a quiet life, he and his friends are still driven to work on their time machine, which they need to escape the machinations of SERN. If they can get the time machine running again, they hope to escape to Steins Gate, a timeline where no one dies and WWIII is averted. Meanwhile, Kurisu has been reborn as an experimental AI and a time traveler from the future is lost somewhere in the past.

The stakes are high and personal for every character, which makes *Steins;Gate 0* an engrossing read. The art strikes a good balance between detailed backgrounds and simple characters. One drawback is that, even though the story takes place over weeks, the characters never change their clothing or appearance. This may have been necessary in the game, but in a manga, it's not like a change of clothes will render the characters unrecognizable. The characters and inks are consistent from page to page and both emotional and action sequences are handled with skill.

While it may take some time for newcomers to *Steins;Gate* to catch up, the art makes the story enjoyable to follow and keeps the action flowing. Established fans should enjoy this peek at an alternate *Steins;Gate* history, and time-travel and SF fans will find plenty to draw them in. (Che Gilson)

**PUBLISHER**
Viz Media

**STORY AND ART**
Rumiko Takahashi

**RATING**
T+

## Mao

Nanoka is your average junior high student who's teleported to the 1920s after stepping through the gate of an abandoned shopping street. She's immediately set upon by a giant praying mantis when a handsome, mysterious young man with a sword appears. This is his perfect cue to step in and save the day, but he adamantly refuses to do anything, leading Nanoka to huffily declare him am inconsiderate jerk. Obviously, since the manga is named after him, from this point we'll be following Mao on his quest to defeat the demon cat Byoki.

*Mao* is a throwback to simpler times, when girls with short bob cuts literally stumbled into adventure and romance on their way home from school. The style and pacing evoke the spirit of the '80s, not surprising given that this is a Rumiko Takahashi series. What is surprising is that it's not a forgotten curiosity that slipped through the gulf between hit Takahashi titles like *Urusei Yatsura* and *Inuyasha*, but a brand-new work that began serialization in 2019. There's no clue that Nanoka lives in the 21st century until a scene where she and a classmate investigate their town's mysteries by looking up tweets on the Internet. The sudden reference to social media platforms may give old-school manga fans severe vertigo, so consider having a wall or a solid piece of furniture nearby to lean on when reading *Mao*.

The setting bounces between the modern

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day and the past as Nanoka learns to cross the barrier between the two worlds at will. Given the retro Taisho-era setting and occasional clash between yokai and swordsmen, *Mao* might draw comparisons to *Demon Slayer*, but they couldn't be more different in tone and execution. Whereas *Demon Slayer* is a blood-and-guts shonen manga with feverish displays of emotional melodrama, *Mao* is subdued and pensive, even when bloodthirsty spider-women charge into the scene. Characters are given ample space to think about and process what's going on, something that's often missing from action manga where everything boils down to a contest of who can swing their weapon in the coolest fashion. The action scenes are economic and practical, which may come as a breath of fresh air for anyone tired of following drawn-out power level wackiness. As of Volume One, there's no explanation for Nanoka's ability to slip between time periods, and it probably won't matter in the end even if it's all attributed to magic. As long as the character-building remains strong, the scant details on time-travel mechanics should become less relevant.

Volume One feels brief, despite being the standard length for a manga volume, due to the tight pacing and Takahashi's measured delivery of info on the world and characters. *Mao* reads like it's been prepped and primed for an anime, which may explain why the beginning is so brisk and the wordy parts are kept lean and fluid. Altogether, it's a solidly constructed manga from an artist whose reputation alone will sell books. **Recommended.** (David Estrella)

**PUBLISHER**
One Peace
**ORIGINAL STORY**
Shimesaba
**CHARACTER DESIGN**
booota
**MANGA ADAPTATION**
Imaru Adachi
**RATING**
OT

## Higehiro: After Being Rejected, I Shaved and Took in a High School Runaway

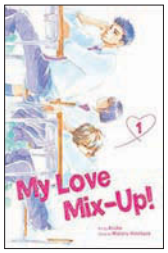
What would you do after getting rejected by the woman of your dreams? Cut your hair or maybe go out with your friends for a few drinks? How about taking in a high school girl to live with you? That last sentence may seem ridiculous, but that's the situation our main character gets himself into. You don't have to look farther than the title to see where the problematic plot of *Higehiro: After Being Rejected, I Shaved and Took in a High School Runaway* is going.

We first meet Yoshida, a salaryman, after being rejected by his busty supervisor. Staggering back home after a long night of heavy drinking, he stumbles upon a high schooler named Sayu sitting under a lamppost. Here begins the slippery slope into questionable territory. With nowhere to go, Sayu asks to spend the night at Yoshida's place, offering to sleep with him. Yoshida (thankfully!) rejects her offer because he's "not having sex with a kid." He does, however, let her stay with him in exchange for doing all the household chores. He decides to keep Sayu a secret from his cohorts—because, you know, this is completely illegal—who all assume he's found himself a girlfriend.

Based on the situation we find her in, it's clear that Sayu has a traumatic past. She automatically offers men her body and gets nervous about accepting money or gifts without giving sexual favors in return. Yoshida tries to teach Sayu about self-respect, but he does it by calling her "stupid" and a "brat" who needs "guts and grit" to survive.

The story centers around Yoshida trying to act as Sayu's stand-in guardian, though it's clear from some of his actions and the lack of clear boundaries that his feelings aren't strictly parental. The back-cover text that labels this a romcom and calls the main characters an "unbalanced couple" is entirely inappropriate. There are also some harem vibes going on as more women show up to express interest in Yoshida, leaving me confused about the direction and point of the story. I've read through the first volume four times to make sure I wasn't missing something, but no, I felt uncomfortable reading it each time. The questionable motives, bad writing on the female characters, and confusing tone quickly turned me from a quizzical reader to a disappointed one.

On the surface, *Higehiro* is potentially entertaining, but it's a tough book to recommend due to the child/adult "romance" elements it flirts with. To its credit, it doesn't go as far as having Yoshida take advantage of Sayu, but the ambiguity of the relationship between a grown man and a homeless teenager still crosses a line. If there were clear boundaries drawn and more emphasis on getting Sayu real help instead of making her do housework and telling her to toughen up, it might hit differently. It feels like *Higehiro* tries too hard to make a "good guy" story out of a situation a genuinely good guy wouldn't get into, and so far it's off to a rough start. (Brianna Fox-Priest)




**PUBLISHER**
Viz Media
**STORY**
Wataru Hinekure
**ART**
Aruko
**RATING**
T

## My Love Mix-Up!

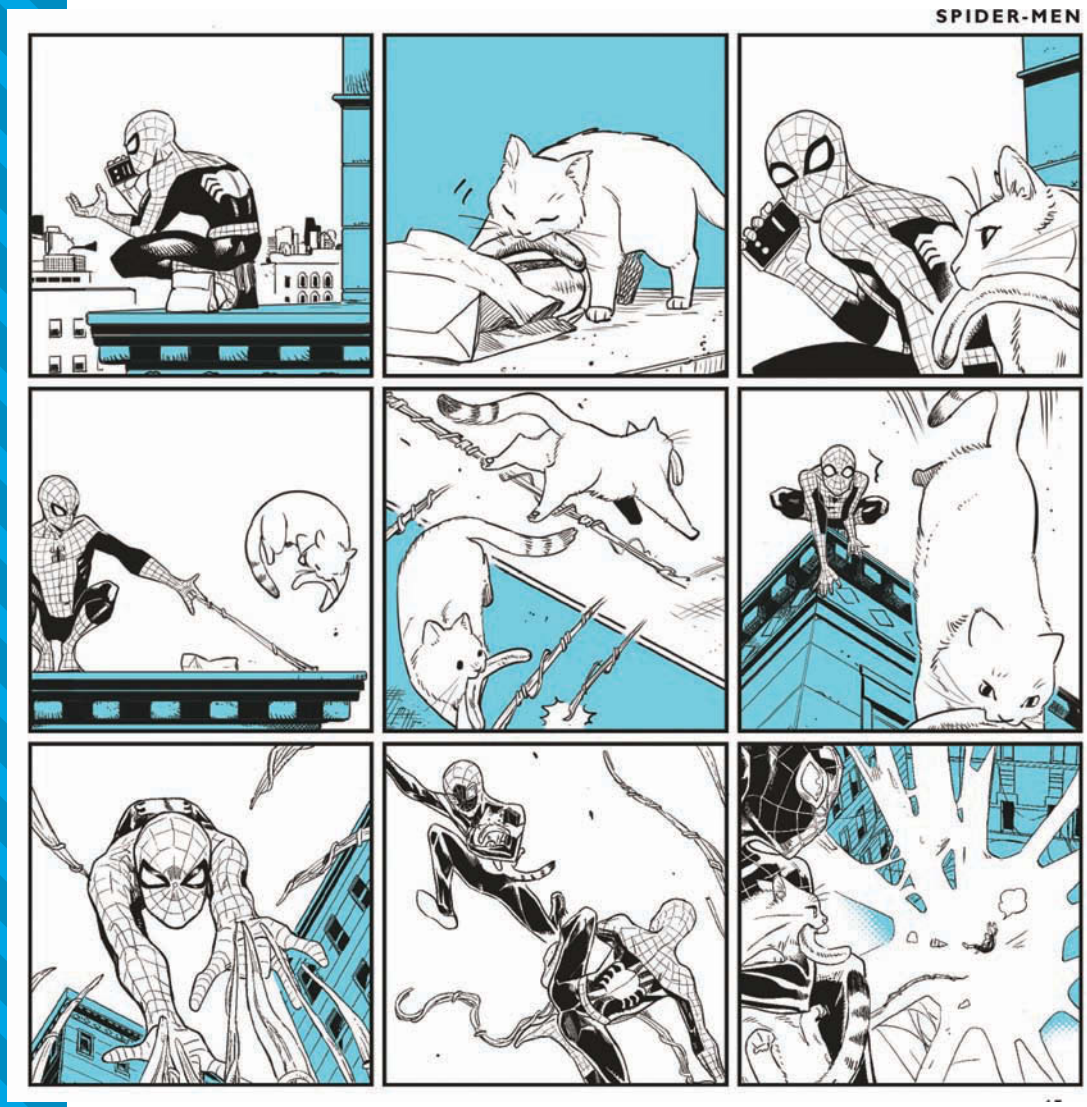
*My Love Mix-Up!* begins with a misunderstanding that launches a thousand miscommunications. Aoki has a crush on his female classmate Hashimoto, who's warm, kind, and one of his best friends. But when he borrows an eraser from her, he sees the name Ida carved into it next to a heart. Clearly, Hashimoto has a crush on the cool, collected Ida, another boy in their class. After Hashimoto swears Aoki to secrecy, he feels duty-bound to protect his friend's feelings. So when Ida sees the eraser, Aoki does the noble thing and lets Ida believe *he* carved the message.

Ida surprises Aoki by taking his supposed feelings seriously. He offers to get to know Aoki better so he can give Aoki an honest response. Aoki tries to use the situation to bring Ida and Hashimoto together, but as he finds himself in Ida's company more and more, he discovers that the other boy makes his heart skip a beat. Mixed into this lopsided love triangle are wild assumptions, cross-dressing, and Aoki's meddling friend Akkun. With first love at stake, Aoki can barely tell up from down.

Romance fans will find the gentle humor and familiar romcom situations as comforting as a cup of tea. The charm comes from watching Aoki fumble every opportunity not to screw up. Each attempt to make things better seems to dig him into a deeper grave. At the same time, he finds himself considering, with honesty and minimal shame, the possibility that he could fall for Ida. To Ida's credit, he's neither defensive nor dismissive about Aoki's feelings. It's that core of decency that begins to attract Aoki. But as well-meaning as the characters are, they can't stop falling into mishaps and misunderstandings.

Aruko's art is cute and capable, with classic loose linework and minimal backgrounds. The

settings don't get much more detailed than some establishing shots of school and labels like "Restaurant." The focus, as in so many shojo romance manga, is on close-ups of the main characters and their emotions. The characters are cute and drawn with consistency. The art has an easy flow to it and the story is absorbing. *My Love Mix-Up!* will win over shojo readers looking for a sweet, slightly unconventional love story. (Che Gilson)



**PUBLISHER** Viz Media
**STORY AND ART** Neo Fuji
**RATING** All Ages

## Marvel Meow

Despite being the basis for some of the world's most popular movies and TV shows for the past decade, the fanbase for Marvel comics—that is to say, the actual comics themselves—hasn't significantly changed on a grand scale. There's simply too much disconnect between what audiences love on the screen and the content of those superhero comics priced $4 to $6 for 23 pages. But *Marvel Meow* knows the score, as this team-up crossover between Viz Media and Marvel Entertainment provides the kind of content *I* crave from the House of Ideas: more adorable antics from Captain Marvel's alien kitty cat! (For you true believers, it's not Goose from the movie, but Chewie, the cat's original name in the *Captain Marvel* comics.)

Nao Fuji—an actual Japanese artist; she's not another "Akira Yoshida"!—has created a series of simple-to-read, often wordless stories about a super cat/alien getting into mischief with various key figures from the Marvel universe. That isn't limited to just the (to date) MCU, mind you. Chewie meets the X-Men, Deadpool (and Dogpool!), Gwenpool, Galactus, multiple Spider-Men (Peter and Miles), and far more. Even my personal favorites, Moon Knight and Daredevil, are represented.

Most of these short comics were originally created as digital strips for Marvel's Instagram, with some later used as variant covers for comics published in March 2019. As *Marvel Meow* is not exclusive to "the direct market,"

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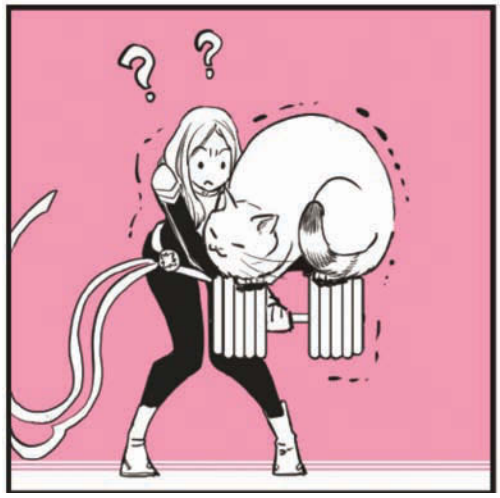

helpful glossaries are included for the general audience who might be unfamiliar with all the characters, with brief summaries identifying who everybody is on each page.

In only about 72 pages, *Marvel Meow* does more to entice fans of the TV/film/animation/game interpretations of the Marvel superheroes to actually *read comics* than any "event" storyline laden with tie-ins and crossovers requiring a reading order checklist. Here's hoping this is the first of more engaging Marvel/manga collaborations. **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)

**PUBLISHER** Kodansha
**STORY** Reiji Miyajima
**ART** Yuka Kinami
**RATING** T

## Rent-A-(Really Shy!)-Girlfriend

*Rent-A-(Really Shy!)-Girlfriend* is the unwieldy title of this spin-off from the *Rent-A-Girlfriend* romantic comedy series by Reiji Miyajima. Newcomer Yuka Kinami scores a credit for assisting on the art. For the sake of context, the main *Rent-A-Girlfriend* series is about a young man coping with a recent break-up by patroniz-

© Nikki Asada/ Kodansha Ltd.

ing an agency that hires out women to go on platonic dates for money. *Shy Girlfriend* centers on Sumi Sakurasawa, a rental girlfriend who ironically suffers from an anxiety disorder that makes it hard for her to talk to new people.

While it seems like the wrong line of work for a shy person, Sumi sees her job as a rental girlfriend as a pathway to a career as an idol. Much as this may be a questionable leap from one shady organization to another, Sumi's commitment to her dream is the one thing that keeps her going from day to day and from date to date. She's beset by all manner of agonizing social situations, such as being unable to find a good seat at the doughnut shop or being forced to approach a girl who's lost her wallet. Fortunately, the faceless men who hire her for dates are mild-mannered and mostly don't mind that she communicates 95% of the time via panicked hand gestures. If Sumi had just a little more confidence, life would be a breeze.

*Rent-A-(Really Shy!)-Girlfriend* is expressly for manga fans who base their enjoyment of a series on the attractiveness and date-ability of the female characters. There's not much drama or conflict to be found, just cute girls being cute. The worst thing that happens to Sumi is getting a bad rating on her profile after a date. The phrase "slice-of-life" is thrown around a lot as a catch-all label for things that don't fit easily into a genre, but *Shy Girlfriend* really is just a collection of observations of Sumi's life as a rental girlfriend. The one developing thread that ties the chapters together is her budding friendship with another rental girlfriend, Chizuru Mizuhara, the central heroine of the original manga series.

A full appreciation of *Shy Girlfriend* likely requires familiarity with the original series, and even then it's a lightweight read. It's supplementary material that doesn't present a compelling reason to exist beyond its association with a popular manga. Unlike other recent manga that feature women working in companionship services (*JK Haru is a Sex Worker in Another World* comes to mind), *Shy Girlfriend* is deeply afraid of contemplating any real experiences that sex workers might deal with. Even with a handful of titillating peeks at Sumi's underwear and bare legs, the manga comes across as strangely sanitized. Readers who get off on the "purity" of female characters in fiction may go for the extremely mild girlfriend experience offered here, but most everyone else will miss the appeal of *Rent-A-(Really Shy!)-Girlfriend*. (David Estrella)

**PUBLISHER**
Kodansha

**STORY AND ART**
Nikki Asada

**RATING**
T

## The Springtime of My Life Began with You

High school student Suehiro lives a quiet and modest life. She's totally content sitting at her desk, reading the same book over and over again and blending into the background. So when her wildly popular classmate Takasago asks her to go out with him, she's completely blindsided. What could he possibly want with her but to use her as part of a cruel joke? As she soon finds out, a lot more than she bargained for. Takasago really wants to start dating.

*The Springtime of My Life Began with You* is a heartwarming tale of unexpected connections. Shy Suehiro finds it difficult to believe Takasago is serious about her and angrily accuses him of making fun of her, but as the pair start spending time together, Takasago shows his true colors: not an ultra-popular playboy at all, but a kindhearted and caring young man who really does want Suehiro as his girlfriend, much to the chagrin of the "cool

kids" he hangs out with. Takasago walks the walk and slowly proves to Suehiro that he's the real deal. He insists on being with her, but never in an uncomfortable manner, and it's difficult not to swoon while reading.

Too often, anime and manga series rely on a love-obsessed girl pushing her crush into liking her and spending time with her. This gentle, earnest story flips the script. Takasago isn't mean or overbearing, and he wants what's best for Suehiro, at one point creating a school club for her so she can make all the fun memories she's privately wanted to experience. Simple pleasures like staying after school with friends, chowing down on snacks, and staying after hours in the building make her smile, and Takasago works tirelessly to get them for her.

It's soon revealed Takasago has an intriguing past that Suehiro is not yet privy to, but gradually learning about the characters is one of the book's pleasures. It's uplifting to see the boyfriend in this relationship work so doggedly to make his girlfriend feel loved and appreciated, as well as help her get over her hang-ups about not being good enough or important enough to be seen with him. There is no catch, there are no stipulations placed on Suehiro, just the offer of love if she's able to open up and accept it.

In addition to softly beautiful art and smart dialogue, *The Springtime of My Life Began with You* features a story that's gentle yet addictively page-turning. It's something of a rarity in romance manga to see gender roles reversed like this, and that's reason enough to try it out. The first volume doesn't completely reveal the true natures of both characters or air out their individual problems and paths to happiness, but it builds a strong foundation for future volumes. It's a must-read for romance manga fans and anyone who's ever wished they could meet someone who loved them for themselves. And Takasago sure is dreamy. **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)

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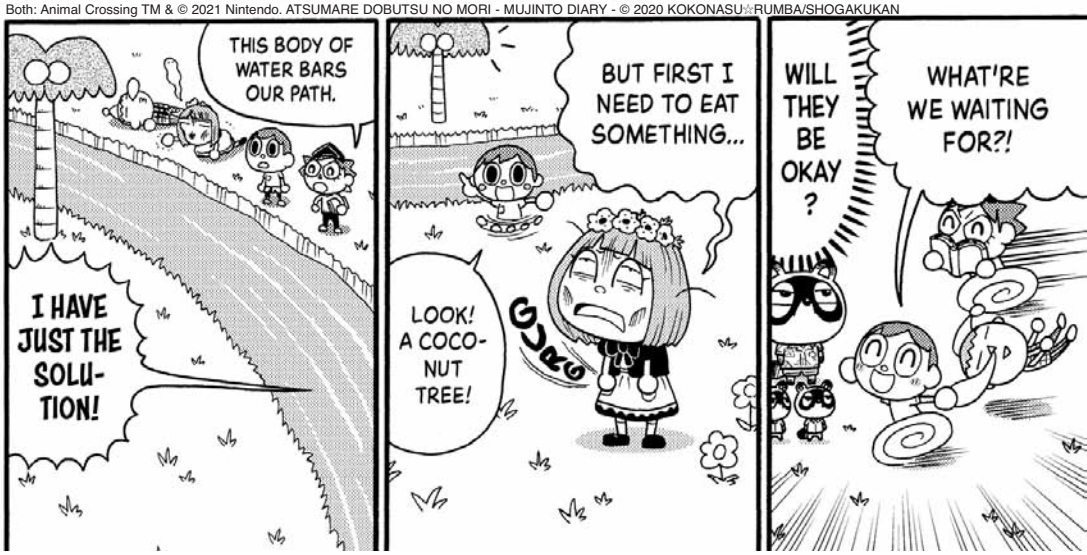
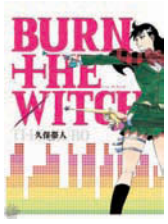



**PUBLISHER**
Viz Media

**STORY AND ART**
Tite Kubo

**RATING**
T

## Burn the Witch

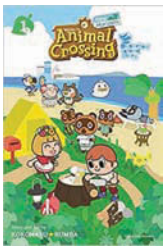
Tite Kubo (*Bleach*) is back, and as gung-ho as ever, with the frenetic fantasy spinoff *Burn the Witch*. Noel Niihashi is part of the Wing Binders, a group of witches and wizards who protect mundane Front London and magical Reverse London from attacks by creatures known as dragons. These dragons aren't quite the fire-breathing reptiles from myth, though they share some similarities. Instead, dragons are a myriad of strange and wondrous monsters that the people of Reverse London put to countless uses despite their danger to humans.

Balgo, a young man whose goal in life is a peek at Noel's knickers, gets dragged into Reverse London, where dragons both dwell and are contained. Turned into a "Dragonclad" thanks to a dragon bite, Balgo becomes the property of the Wing Binders and winds up in a sort of limbo status, working and living in Reverse London. In Reverse London, residents live almost side by side with dragons, which fill in for 90% of technology. The details of this magical otherworld, which is also the Western Branch of the Soul Society from *Bleach*, aren't too clear, but logical world-building isn't the point. Better to soak in the great art and inventive creature designs.

The dragons are delightfully bizarre and detailed and take on endless inventive shapes and jobs. There are clever between-chapter

profiles of some of the more common dragons. The characters bear Kubo's artistic stamp and the plot is full of his trademark action scenes, busty girls, and flair for supernatural shenanigans. The plot flows well; the early chapters are slowed somewhat by repeated recaps hashing over the premise, but even these get freshened up with new information. Balgo, a one-dimensional chipper perv, is mostly overshadowed by Noel and her colleague Ninny (maybe not the best name), who take on assignments from the Wing Binders to earn cash and points.

Fans of *Bleach* will be thrilled by *Burn the Witch,* which explores the universe of *Bleach* from a new perspective. Readers unfamiliar with *Bleach* can jump on board with no prior knowledge of Kubo's other works and enjoy this thrill-a-minute ride. **Recommended.** (Che Gilson)




**PUBLISHER**
Viz Media
**STORY AND ART**
Kokonasu Rumba
**RATING**
All Ages

## Animal Crossing: New Horizons Deserted Island Diary

The colorful world of *Animal Crossing* is one of the most wholesome in the realm of gaming. But it's also a bit abstract. There's no real story to the games, especially the latest entry, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, where you arrive at a deserted island with the intention of building it into something: your own thriving island paradise, your home away from home.

That's where *Animal Crossing: New Horizons Deserted Island Diary* kicks off. It introduces four goofy villagers—Coroyuki, Benben, Himepoyo, and Guchan—all of whom come to the island under false pretenses. They're looking for fancy resorts and restaurants, but as soon as they set foot on land, Tom Nook, the resident draconian lord of the island (as anyone who's played the games will tell you) is already recruiting them to shape the island and get to work.

So these hapless heroes get to work in this silly gag manga, even though they haven't the first idea about how to cross bodies of water, catch bugs, or look for food. Then they happen upon the island's other inhabitants, the cute anthropomorphic animals the game series is known for, and their beautiful homes. The duck Bill introduces them to crafting and materials and the sheep Dom works with them to gather construction supplies to finally build a home.

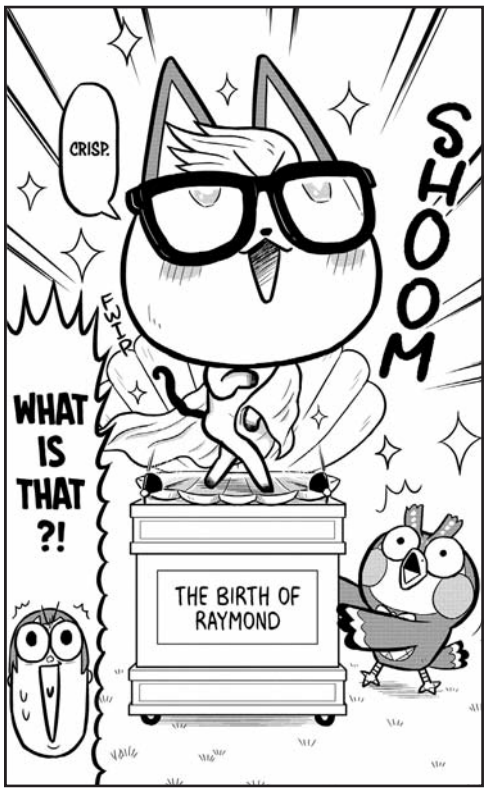
Each chapter is based on things players can do in the game and the humorous ways these hapless friends go about learning them. It's lighthearted through and through, and our heroes are just dimwitted enough to make it an entertaining spectacle instead of the frustrating slog that the actual game can occasionally become while waiting for real-world time to pass. Here, you can just flip the pages to watch things develop.

The gags are funny enough throughout this first volume, with fun animal villagers and their vocal quirks, the Nooks being their usual moneygrubbing selves, and all the weird things to be found while exploring the island. But in the end, the manga is only really entertaining to people who have played the games. That's likely the point, but it might not be enough to sustain an ongoing series.

As of Volume One, this looks likely to remain a silly, ultralight gag manga that will continue pumping out the same jokes using the same material. Fortunately, there's a lot of material in the *Animal Crossing* series, and fans will eat it up. Other readers may be entertained for a short period of time but lose interest after the tenth reference to how clueless the new residents are or how funny it is that the villagers repeat strange words after their sentences. Fans will be excited to return to their favorite island for new adventures, but other readers might want to take this series a little at a time—and maybe not devour the entire first volume at once. (Brittany Vincent)

## Lovesick Ellie

Eriko Ichimura is a shy wallflower with one heck of a social media presence. She spends each day of high school obsessing over the to-die-for Akira Ohmi, whom she affectionately



**PUBLISHER**
Kodansha
**STORY AND ART**
Fujimomo
**RATING**
T

refers to as "Ohmi-kun," and shares her thoughts under the popular Twitter handle "Lovesick Ellie." She doesn't have much of a love life herself, but her fantasies have attracted a huge online following.

In *Lovesick Ellie*, who's better to fantasize about than Ohmi-kun? He's kind, courteous, and oh-so-friendly to all the girls who throw themselves at him day in and day out. Or so Eriko thinks. When she finds Ohmi-kun in private tossing around gifts he's been given and griping about how much his fangirls annoy him, she sees a completely different side, the rude and crude "other" Ohmi-kun.

When an accident causes Eriko's phone to fall into Omi-kun's hands, he blackmails her: if she doesn't tell anyone about his true personality, he won't share her online alter ego with the world. In return, he'll "fulfill all her fantasies." Now Eriko has the guy of her dreams, and he's not anything like the Ohmi-kun she's fantasized about. Still, she keeps up with her tweets while secretly getting to know the foul-mouthed scoundrel behind her fantasy prince.

*Lovesick Ellie* brings to mind series like *Maid-sama* or *Wolf Girl and Black Prince* in which both parties have something to lose if they don't hold up their end of a bargain. There's plenty of tension, back-and-forth romantic jabs, and of uncomfortable moments between the couple. And if that's the kind of romance you're into, you'll love every second of the drama.

Thanks to the smart translation, Ellie's tweets are fun and personable; you could absolutely see your favorite online personalities sharing similar thoughts online. And with the soft, romantic artwork, you're never too far from another heart-pounding shojo moment. When Eriko is embarrassed, her emotional state explodes across the page.

Fortunately, there's warmth and humanity to *Lovesick Ellie* that keep it from veering into completely cruel territory. Readers will grow invested in the characters and eager to see what happens to them next, even if it does seem obvious that Eriko and Ohmi will end up together. How this can happen when they're so completely different might be a mystery, but there's nothing surprising about the "perverted" tension between them, especially with Ellie's overactive imagination. Yours will be put to good use here as well, and you'll be eagerly awaiting the next volume to see where this complicated romance goes next. **Recommended.** (Brittany Vincent)

*Drug Store in Another World* is just what the doctor ordered for isekai anime.

# HAPPY MEDICINE!

By Kara Dennison

Living in the future as we do, we can refill prescriptions online and have them mailed to us automatically every month. But there's no computer system that can do what a real human pharmacist does. They don't just dispense pills once a month. They can offer advice on your regular medications, point you in the right direction for small ailments, and make children's prescriptions taste at least a little less nasty.

They're such a standard part of our life that we sometimes forget just how much they can do. But in fantasy worlds where potions sellers corner the market, a pharmacist would likely seem like some sort of magician. That's certainly true in Reiji Kirio's case, at least.

*Drug Store in Another World: The Slow Life of a Cheat Pharmacist* sounds like a calm, uneventful series. But in the eyes of the locals, Reiji is doing real magic. Then again ... who are we to say he isn't?

## Open for Business

*Drug Store in Another World* comes from a light novel written by Kennoji and illustrated by Matsuuni. Reiji is, you guessed it, a guy from our world who ends up in a fantasy land where he gets to start a new life for himself. With his stressful salaryman career behind him, he opens up a drug store in the village of Kalta.

Soon, Reiji has cornered the market on potions and other medicaments, primarily thanks to his shop's flagship energy potion. It not only works, it actually tastes good—a pleasant surprise in a world where potions are, as a rule, gross. Add in the smiling faces of his employees (werewolf Noela and ghost girl Mina), and he has a comfortable, thriving business.

While the *flora* of Kalta are one-offs of real-world plants at best, most of Reiji's creations (or recreations) are easily recognizable as real-world conveniences. Over

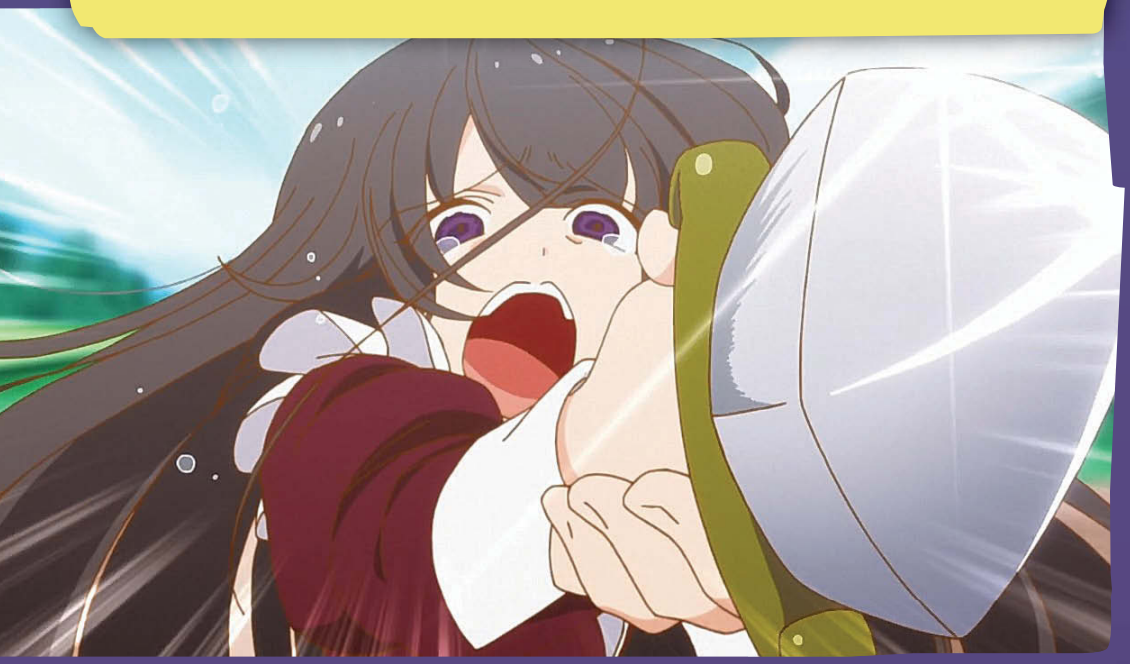


© Kennoji/ Hifumi Shobo, Cheat Pharmacist Production Committee

キリオドラッグ

## HOW NOT TO SUMMON A DEMON LORD

As mentioned, a lot of regular *isekai* character types show up in *Drug Store in Another World*. Naturally, there's a demon lord—but instead of a fight to the death, this one's come in search of employment. Garo Ejil fancies himself a fearsome demonic presence, bullying money out of human commoners so he can buy Reiji's wares. But the pint-sized kid doesn't inspire fear so much as pity, which may be why Reiji eventually consents to giving Ejil a part time job.



the course of the series he mixes up botanical deodorant, a medicinal tea that tames anxiety, and cooling gel. Some of his creations go beyond the medicinal, as he introduces Kalta to dish-washing liquid and metal polish.

Once in a while, though, his creations get a bit fantastical. Last we checked, no one is selling potions that make your inner monologue audible or summon ghosts from artifacts. So despite the "cheat" of the title, Reiji has some serious talent for alchemy ... or, rather, pharmacy.

### Problem Solved

Reiji's job is the same as any pharmacist's: sell things that will help with people's ailments. But in Kalta, which runs on magic and potions, the general perception of what he can do is slightly skewed, to say the least. One day, he may be asked for a hair remover; the next, a love potion or a potion that will help someone win an archery tournament. But he doesn't turn away ridiculous requests entirely. It's his job to help, after all—even if the help he's being asked for appears implausible.

His assistants are equally involved, of course. The adorable Noela serves as a distraction for unruly children (whether she likes it or not), and the ever-smiling Mina keeps the shop running on a day-to-day basis. The pair also offer help and observation when it comes to the customers themselves. Reiji has the talent for potions, but the shop as a whole offers solutions.

And that's because they don't shove a bottle in their customer's hands and send them away (not *always,* anyway). The elf desperate to excel at archery receives coaching and strategy, plus a bottle of monster lure. A noblewoman asking for a youth potion gets a heart-to-heart about confidence and self-worth ... and she gets some nice skin cream, too.

Throughout the series, customers refer to Reiji as a great alchemist, and he's quick to correct them. But maybe he shouldn't be. Between the potions and his ability to figure out what people really need, he *is* a bit of a magician. Or at least sufficiently advanced enough to pass as one.

© Kennoji/ Hifumi Shobo, Cheat Pharmacist Production Committee

### Help Wanted

Naturally, a shop this popular and successful attracts all sorts—including both regular patrons and hopeful employees. The drug store initially has Noela and Mina as the sole assistants. But the more people they win over, the more workers they manage to attract ... Again, whether they like it or not.

As the series goes on, the shop attracts a cross-section of fantasy types. There's Annabel, the bounty hunter with a surprisingly girlish side. Elaine, a young noble who asks for Reiji's help attracting her crush, instead turns her sights on him and takes a temporary job alongside him. Tough-talking tool shop owner Paula clings to him from day one. Water spirit Vivi follows him back from a lakeside holiday. And so on.

One of the many pros of slow life *isekai* series—other than giving you a break from revenge narratives and letting characters be happy—is seeing a new side to these stock characters. The stakes are significantly lower than elsewhere: not so much "stopping the apocalypse" as "getting some of that good energy potion when you don't use human money." The characters are knowing nods to *isekai* series regulars, but affectionate ones.

As much as Reiji may insist that he's no magician, he's definitely something special. His willingness to consult with his customers, plus his pharmaceutical skills, mean he might as well be the alchemist everyone says he is. Not only that, he's doing something he enjoys instead of holding down an office job. All of that, when you put it together, is pretty magical.

***Drug Store in Another World* is available from Crunchyroll.**

### LET'S BE A NOVELIST!

*Drug Store in Another World* got its start on the website *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, a free platform letting visitors publish and read web novels. The site has been the incubator for many successful light novels and anime—primarily *isekai*. Big hitters like *Re:ZERO*, *KonoSuba*, and *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* all got their start here. So did *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas*, the distinctly non-fantasy drama about a boy who befriends a terminally ill classmate.

**REIJI'S JOB IS THE SAME AS ANY PHARMACIST'S: SELL THINGS THAT WILL HELP WITH PEOPLE'S AILMENTS. BUT IN KALTA, WHICH RUNS ON MAGIC AND POTIONS, THE GENERAL PERCEPTION OF WHAT HE CAN DO IS SLIGHTLY SKEWED, TO SAY THE LEAST.**

# OTAKU USA オタク

# MANGA PREVIEWS

We bet you know how this works already, but for those of you in the cheap seats, our manga section is printed in the correct Japanese format, to be read from right to left. Begin on the upper right of each two-page spread, reading each panel right-to-left, from the right page to the left. Click the arrow on the right side to advance to the following pages.

© Shimesaba, Booota 2019, © Imaru Adachi 2019

## HIGEHIRO: AFTER BEING REJECTED, I SHAVED AND TOOK IN A HIGH SCHOOL RUNAWAY

PAGE 39

Original Story by Shimesaba
Manga by Imaru Adachi
Character Design by booota

Yoshida is just your average salaryman, drowning his tears in booze. On his way home one night, he finds a runaway high school girl sitting on the street. She offers to sleep with him in exchange for a place to stay—and Yoshida offers her work instead. A rom-com between the most unbalanced couple you'll ever find!

**Available now!**

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

## LOVESICK ELLIE

PAGE 55

Story and Art by Fujimomo

At high school, she's Eriko Ichimura, the girl so boring no one remembers she exists. But online, she's "Lovesick Ellie," a brash and lusty alternate persona with quite a viral following! Ellie's favorite pastime? Spying on her handsome and perfect classmate Ohmi and spinning wild fantasies in the form of very thirsty tweets. But one day, quite by accident, Eriko learns that Ohmi isn't as perfect as she thought...and he discovers her secret to boot! What's ahead for this two-faced boy and pervy girl?

**Available Dec 14, 2021!**

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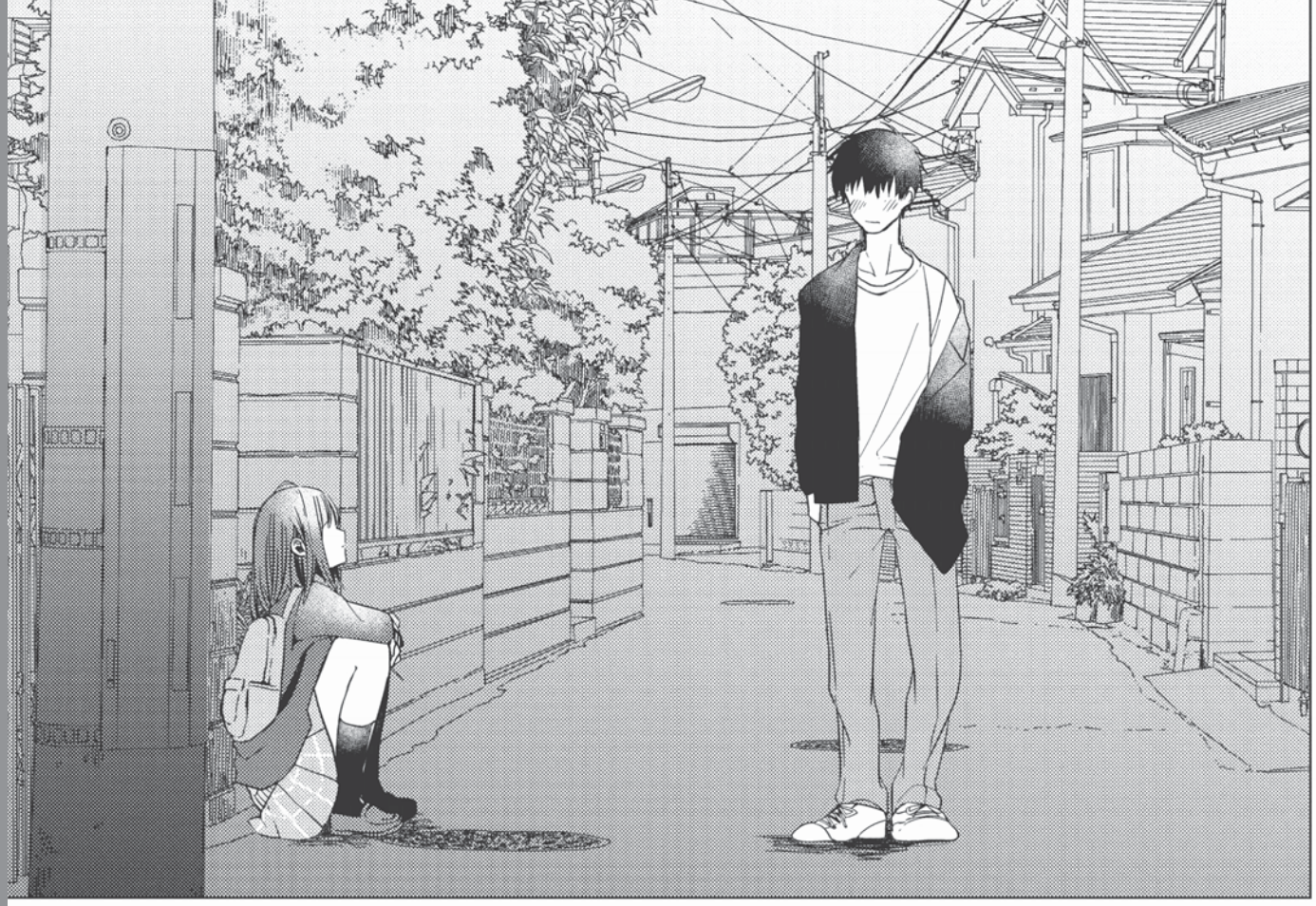

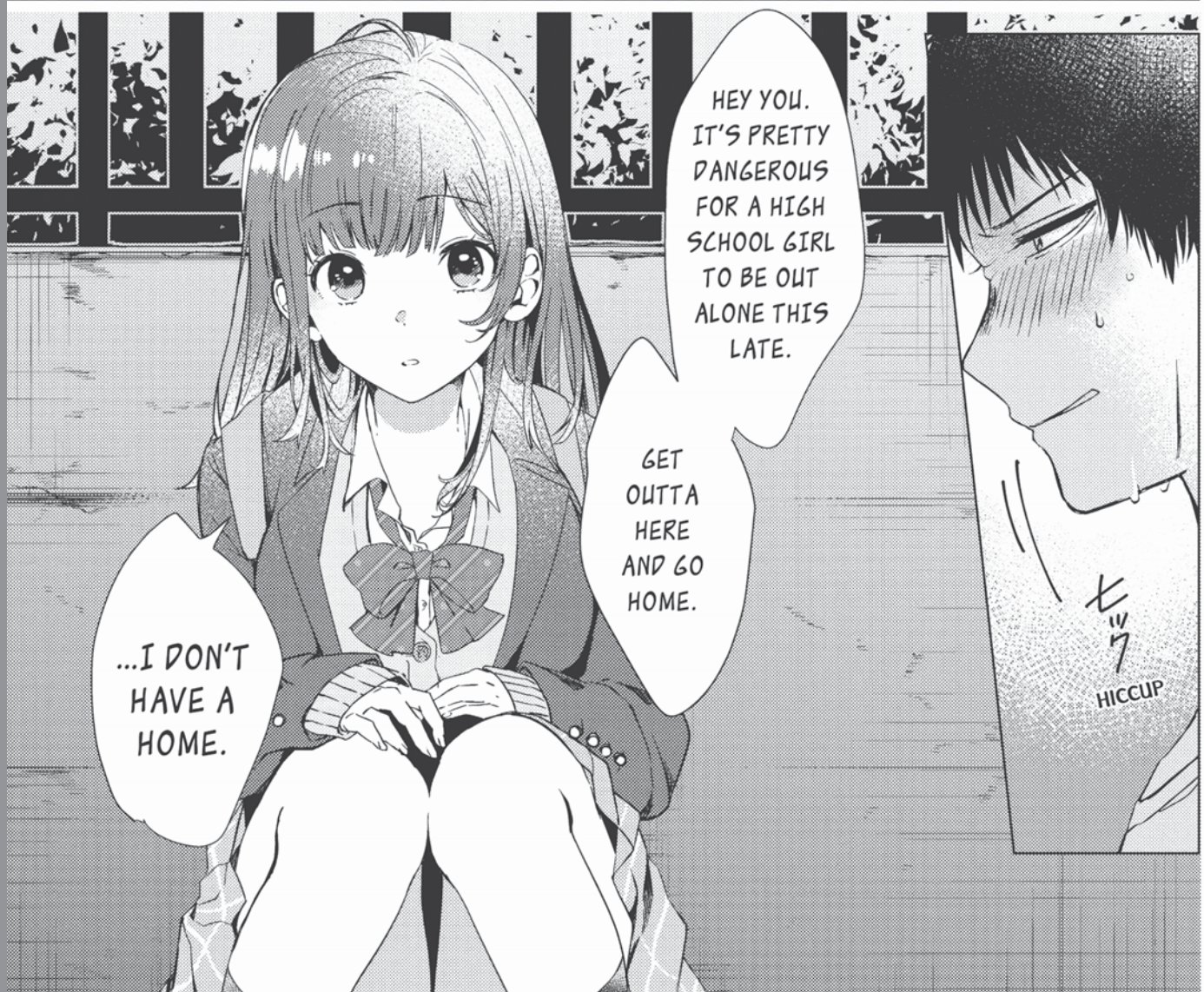


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# One Peace Books - HIGEHIRO

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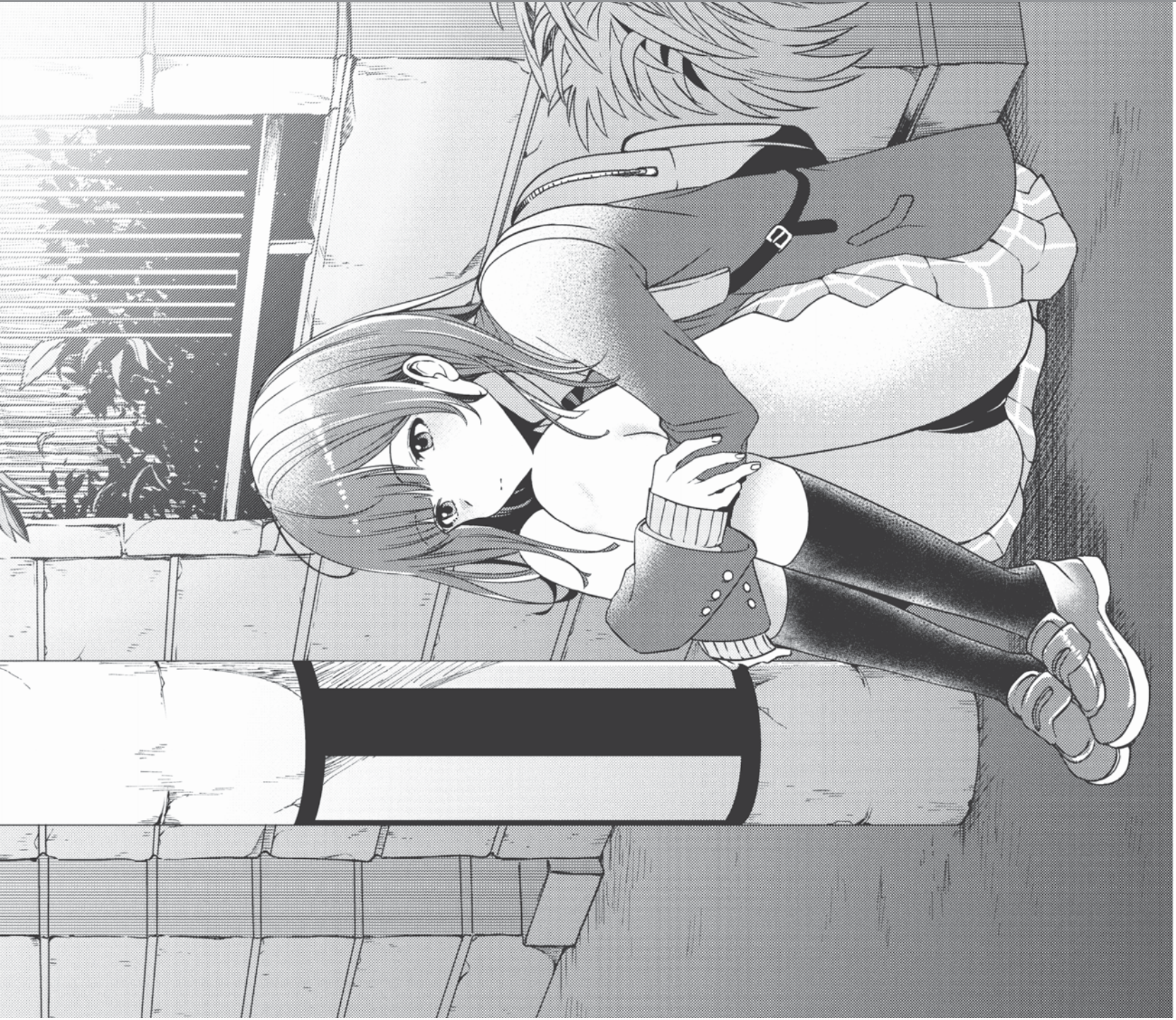

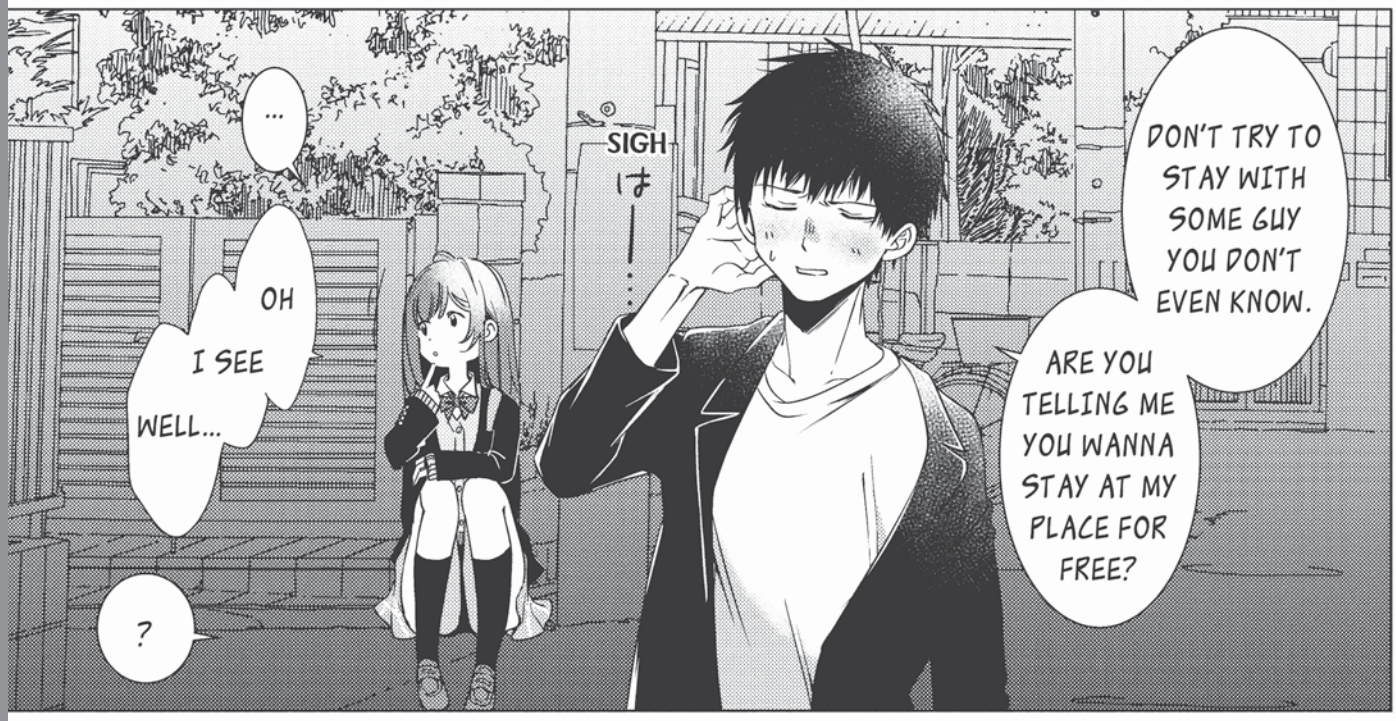

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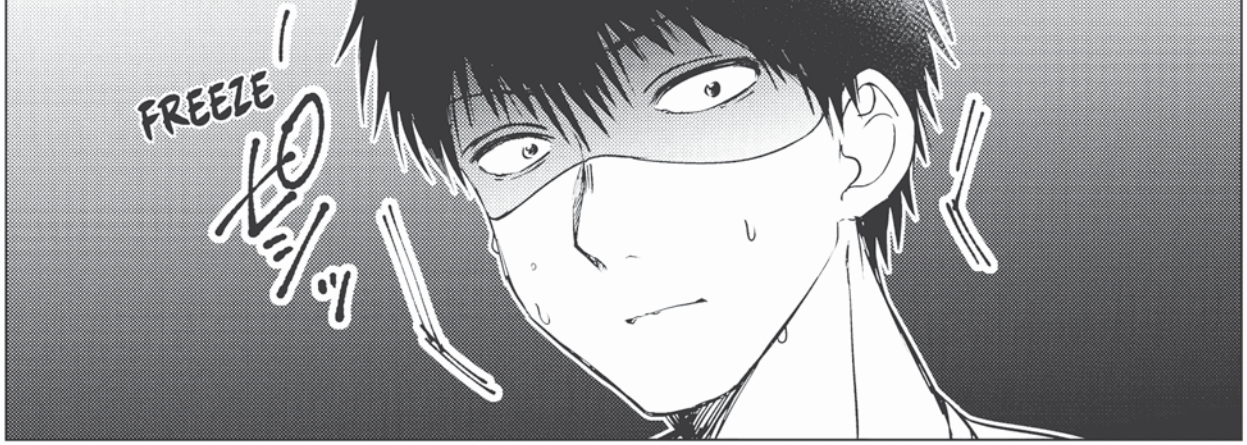

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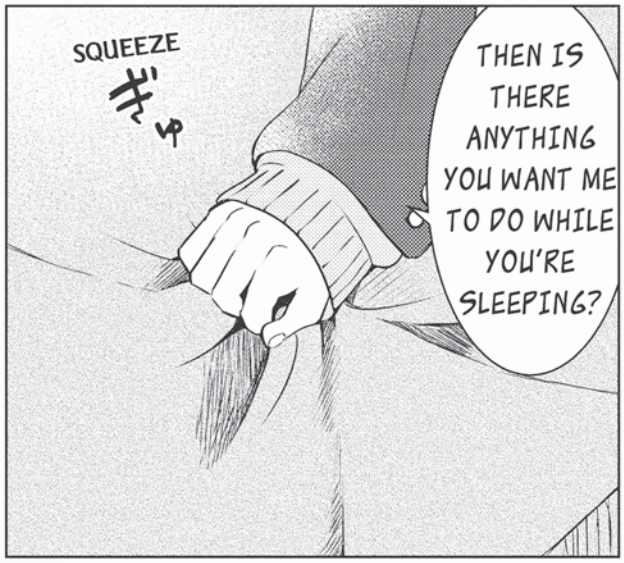

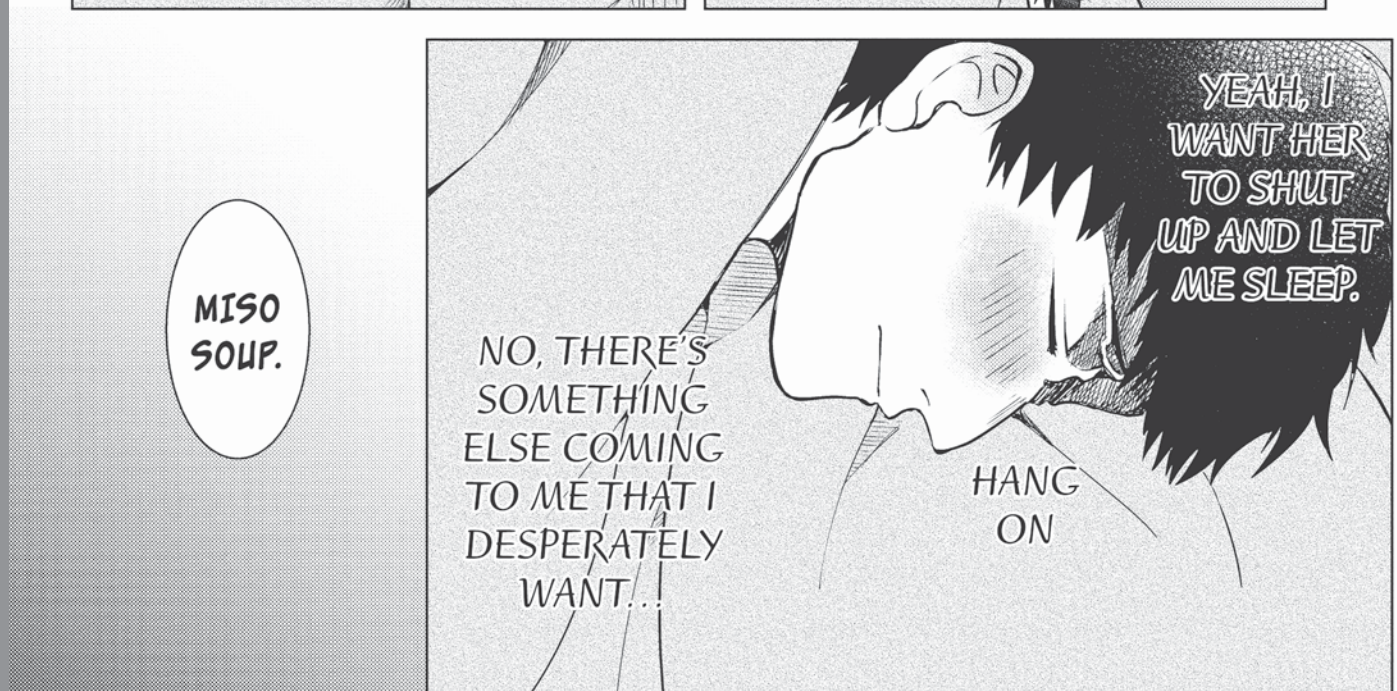


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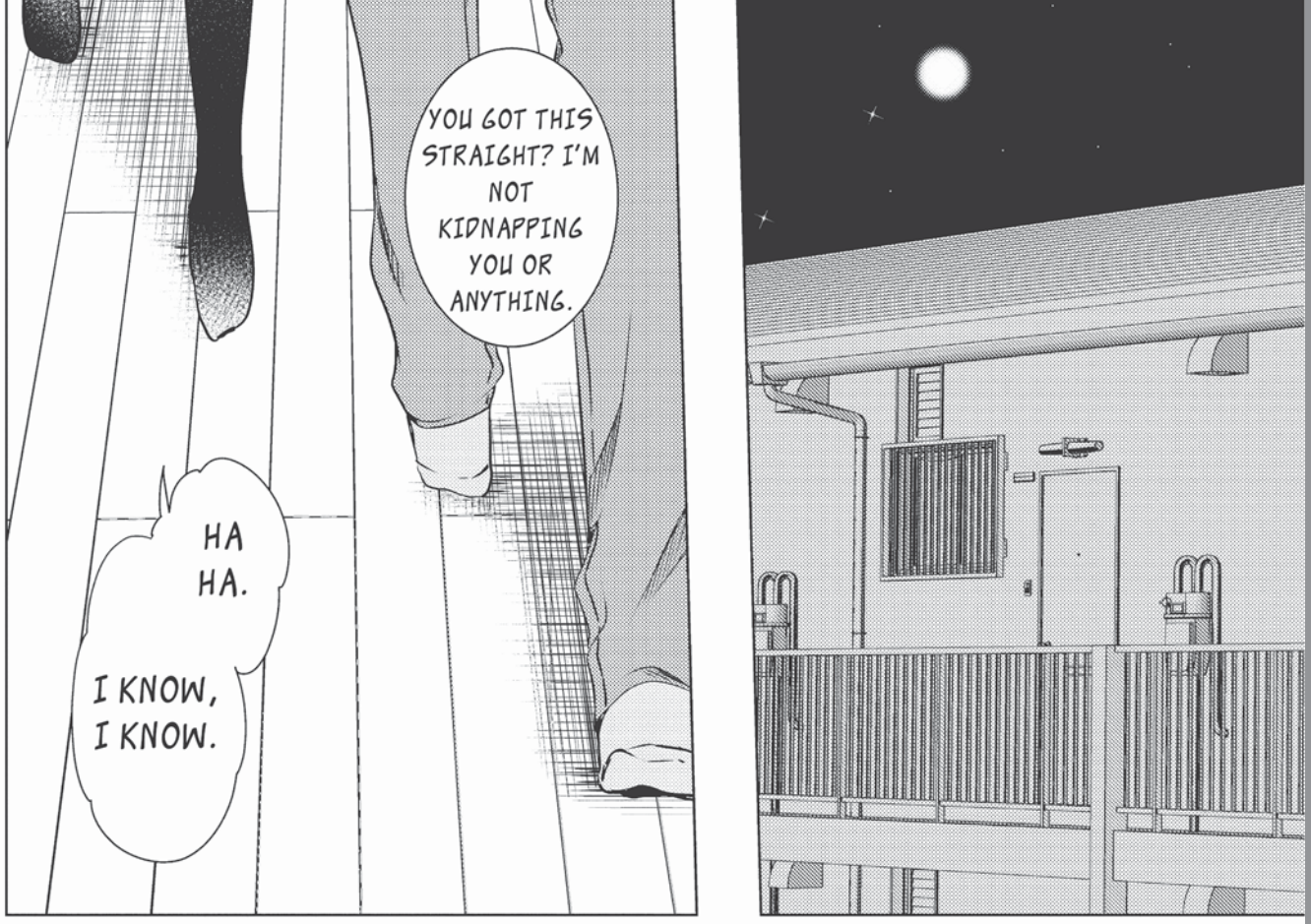


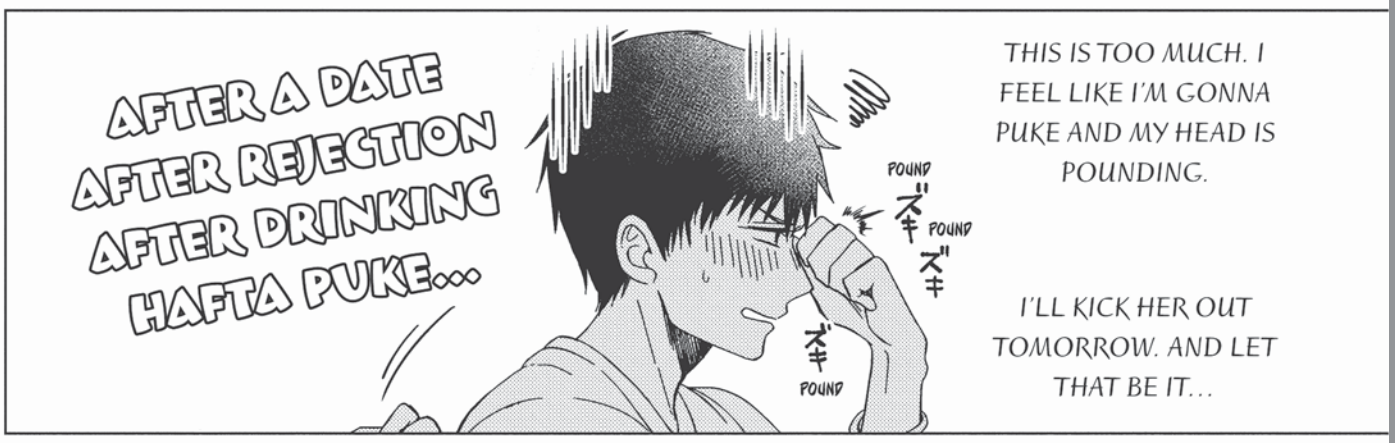

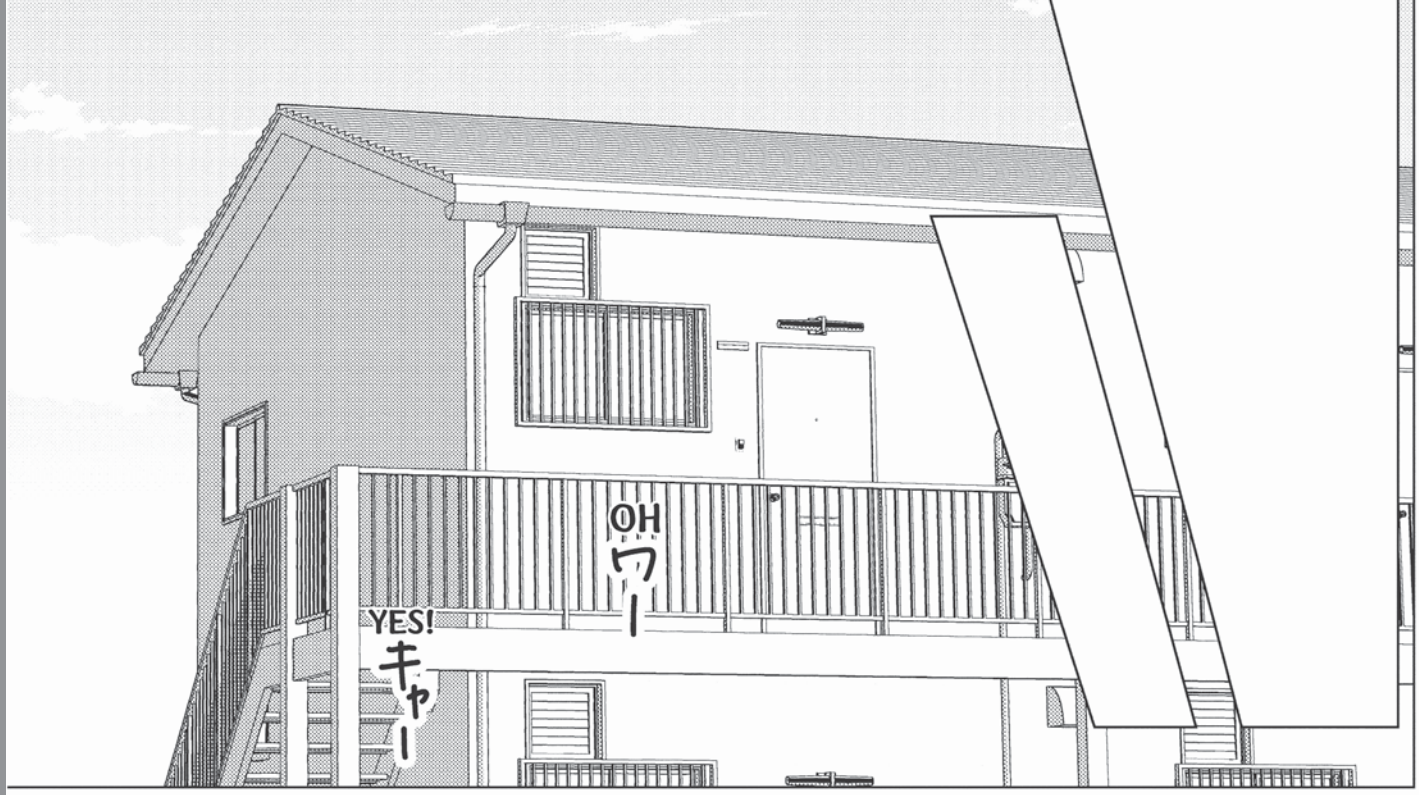


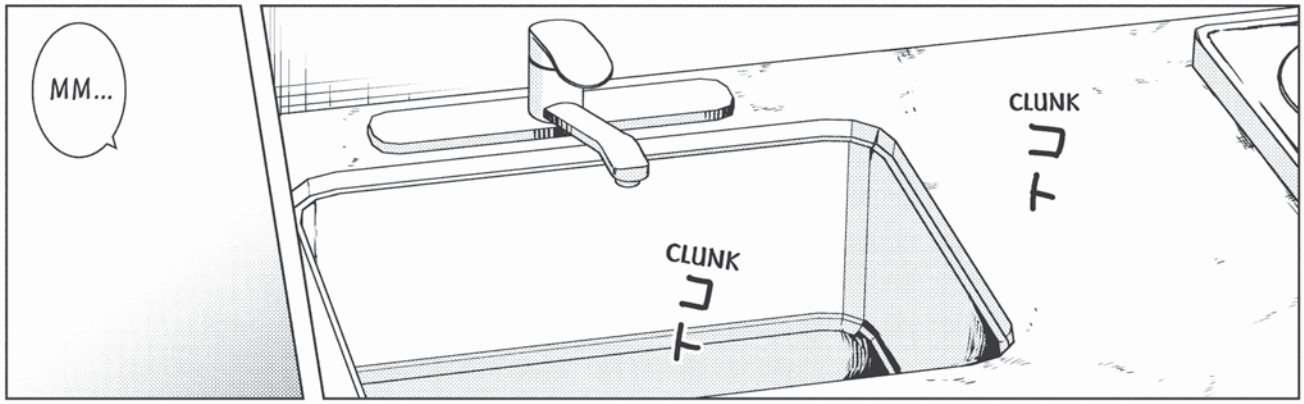

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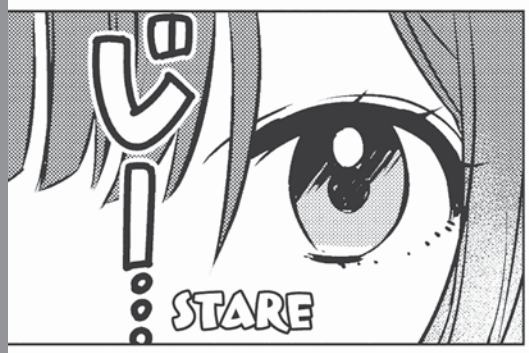


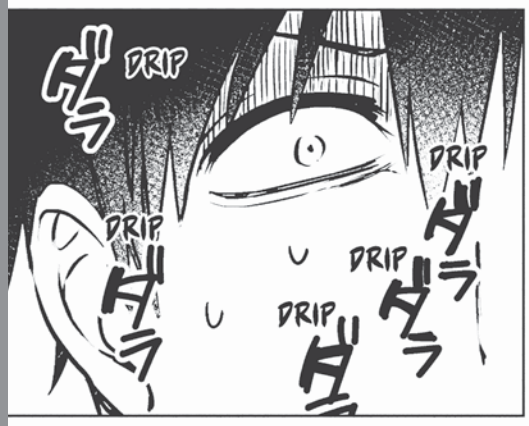

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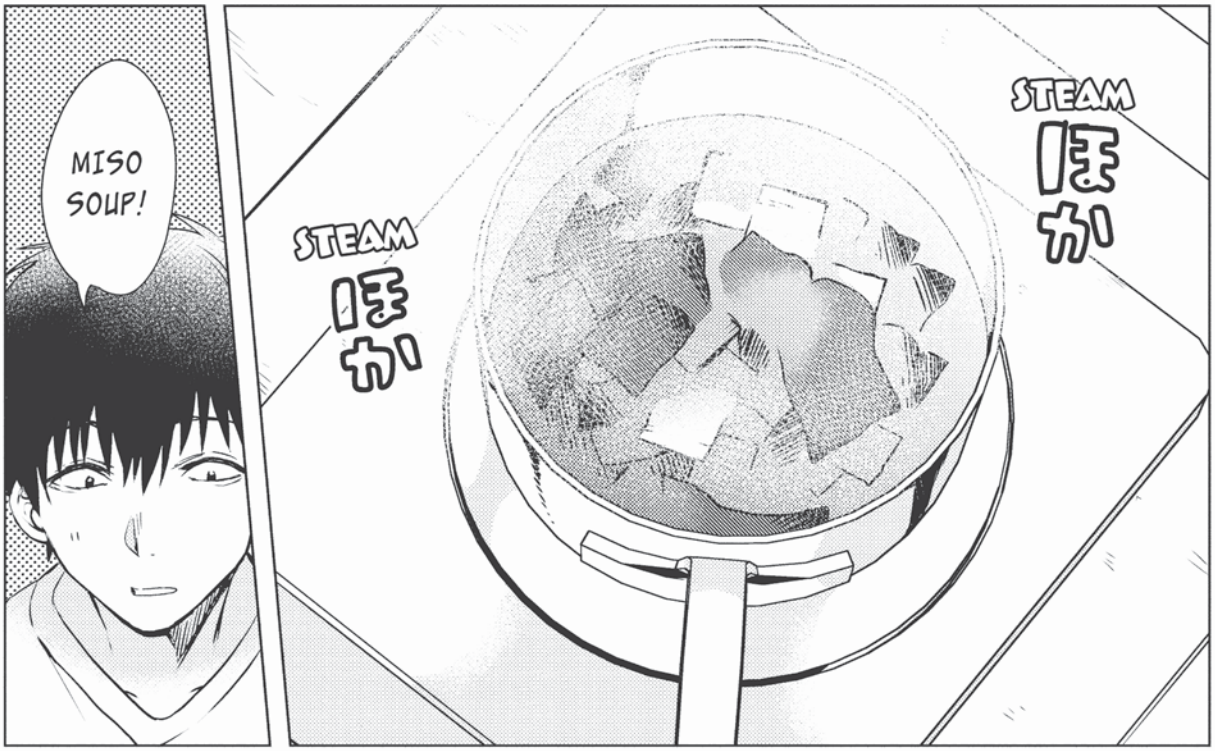

Read the rest in *Higehiro: After Being Rejected, I Shaved and Took in a High School Runaway*, available now!

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**Kodansha - LOVESICK ELLIE**

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

# Kodansha - LOVESICK ELLIE

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

...TIL I DROP!

**Lovesick Ellie**

@ellie_lovesick

The lovesick ramblings of a high school social disaster.

Following **98** Followers **247**

I'LL FANTASIZE...

OH, OKAY!

OH, YEAH... I JUST SAW HIM HEADING FOR THE PREP ROOM.

NISHIMURA-SAN! IS SHIOTA-SENSEI IN?

CRAP!!

びくっ JOLT

...IT'S ICHIMURA. ERIKO ICHIMURA...

REALLY? THANK YOU SO MUCH, NISHIMURA-SAN!

OH, I CAN DELIVER IT!!

PLEASE, YOU'RE FREE TO LEAVE!

TSUYOPON♥ I JUST HAVE TO GET TODAY'S LOG TO THE TEACHER...

STILL BUSY, YURIRIN?

Let's go home.

Kodansha - LOVESICK ELLIE
Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

*Thanks to space-conserving *kanji*, it is entirely possible to fit novels of this length into 140 characters in Japanese.

**Lovesick Ellie** @ellie_lovesick 5 minutes ago
I'm secretly dating the most popular boy in my grade. A wink at school is code for "I love you." Oh no! He's winking at me at lightning speed! Everyone's gonna find out~ (///▽///)♪
#TFWnoBF

NO.

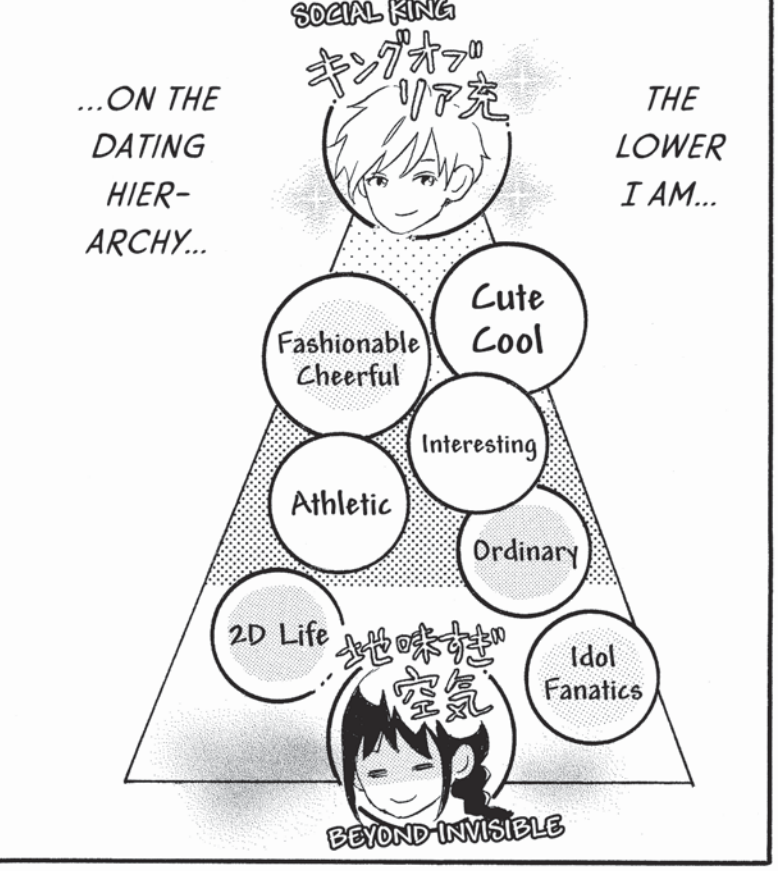
**Lovesick Ellie** @ellie_lovesick 1 minute ago
A girl gave him a cookie. If I started sulking, he'd tell me, "I didn't want to eat a cookie, anyway. I'd rather have jelly."
"I mean, look how jelly you are♡" OMG~~~
#TFWnoBF

HMM...

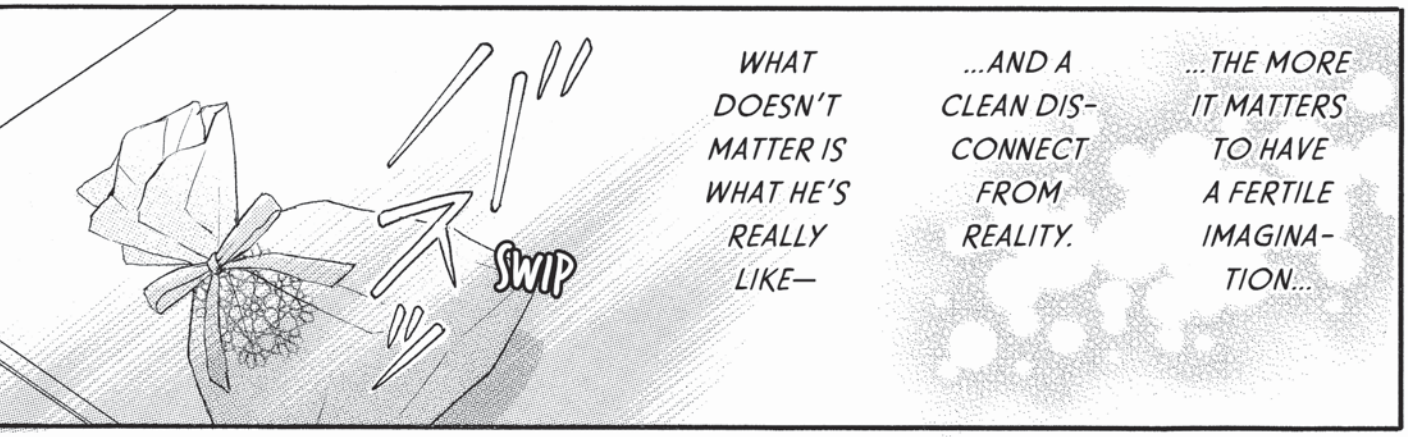
THIS MAY BE MY MAGNUM OPUS...

AH (まって?)

I DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW THIS!!
HEY, SOMEONE GAVE THAT TO YOU. DON'T JUST THROW IT ON THE FLOOR.
THAT AGAIN? REALLY?
WELL, IT'S MINE NOW, SO I CAN DO WHAT I WANT WITH IT.
WAIT... DON'T TELL ME...?!?!
OH, THE COOKIE CAME WITH A CARD. HER E-MAIL'S ON IT.
AH... REALITY IS CRUEL...
This is why I have trust issues...
SUMI! I WANT BARLEY TEA!
SUMI, GO BUY SOME BARLEY TEA. AND GIMME 5000 YEN.
HEY, DON'T CALL YOUR TEACHER BY HIS FIRST NAME.
We're in school, you know.
AND WHY SHOULD I DO THAT?!
I LOST MY JERSEY.
*Approximately 50 USD
HM? HE'S... ON PRETTY GOOD TERMS WITH SHIOTA-SENSEI...


SOCIAL KING
キングオブリア充
...ON THE DATING HIER-ARCHY...
THE LOWER I AM...
Cute Cool
Fashionable Cheerful
Interesting
Athletic
Ordinary
2D Life
地味すぎ空気
Idol Fanatics
BEYOND INVISIBLE

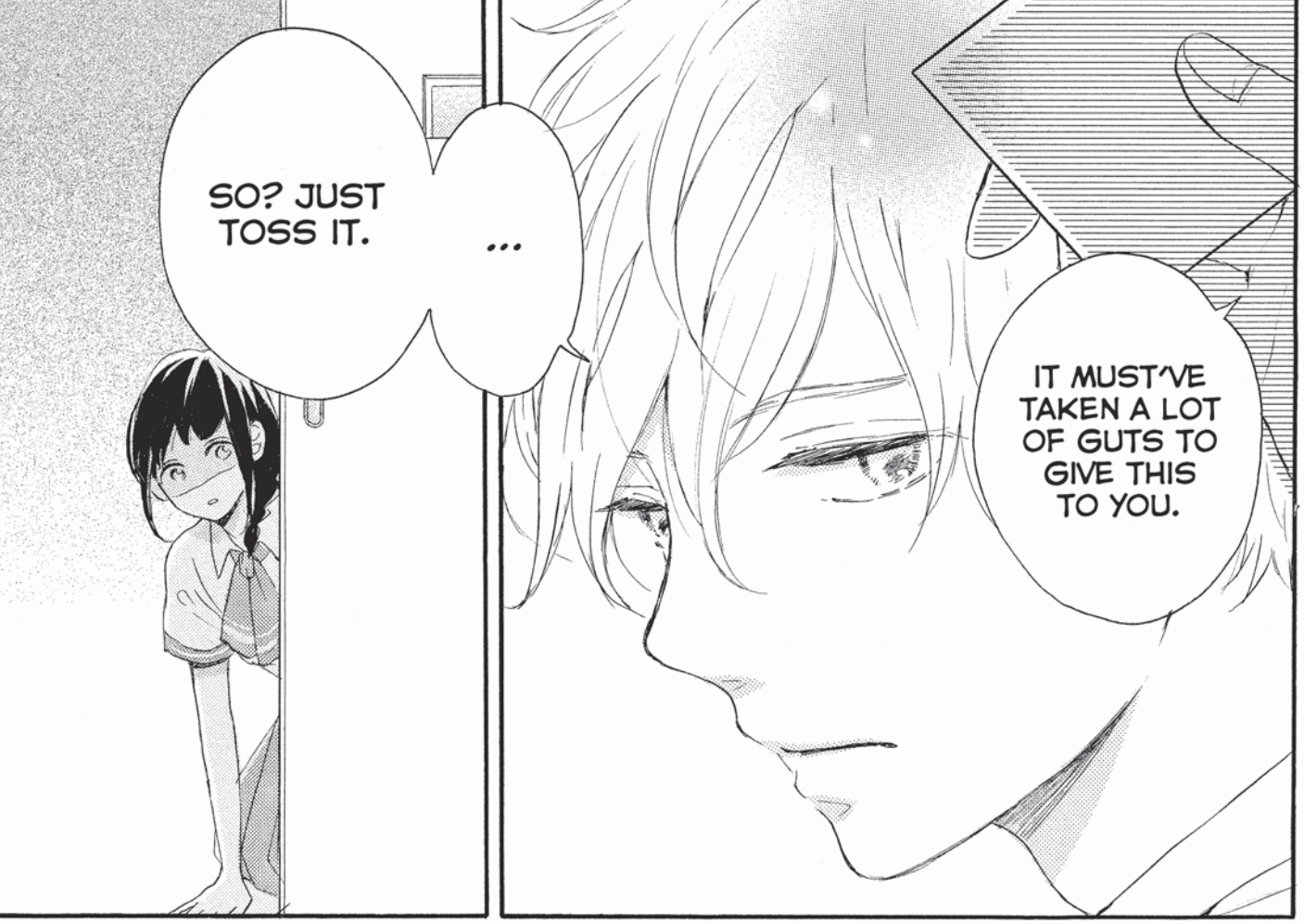
It's already been half a year...
MY LIFE IS NOT MEANING-LESS!
I'M JUST... ENJOYING CUTE BOYS HOWEVER I CAN.

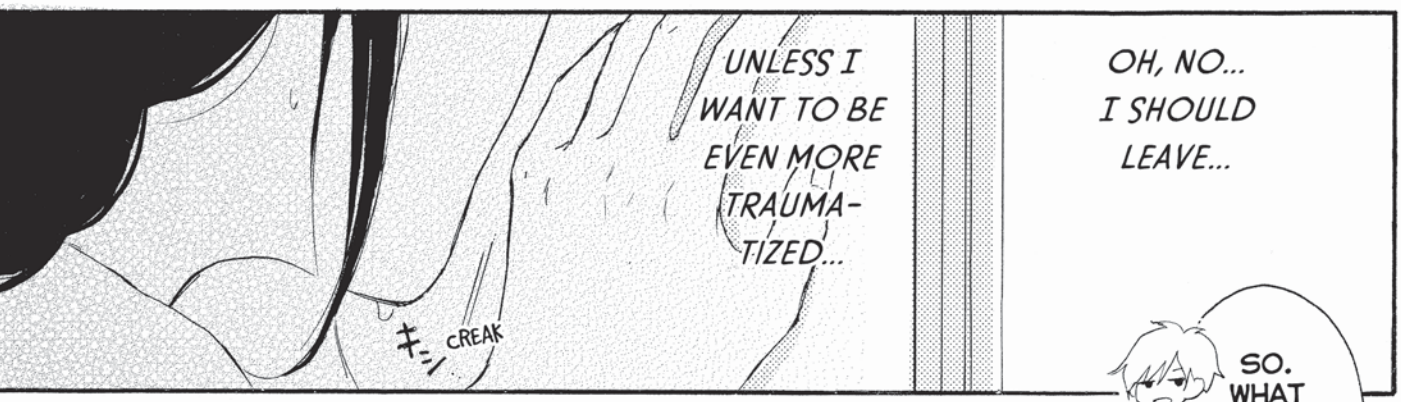

SWIP
WHAT DOESN'T MATTER IS WHAT HE'S REALLY LIKE—
...AND A CLEAN DIS-CONNECT FROM REALITY.
...THE MORE IT MATTERS TO HAVE A FERTILE IMAGINA-TION...

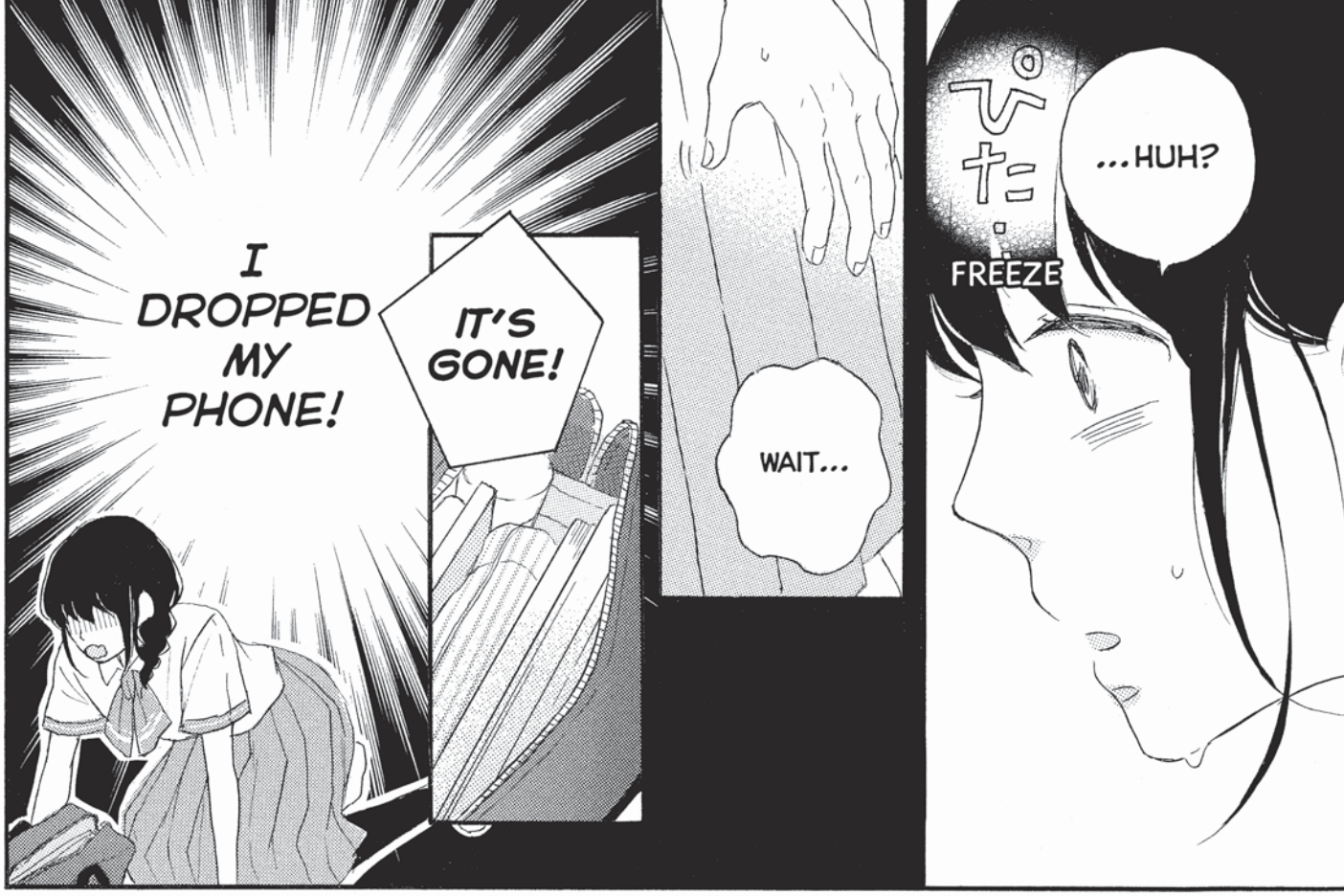
UGH...
I'M TIRED...

Kodansha - LOVESICK ELLIE
Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.




I DROPPED MY PHONE!
IT'S GONE!
WAIT...
ぴた
FREEZE
...HUH?

!
THUD
I BETTER FIND IT RIGHT AWAY—
OH...
OH, EXCUSE ME.
I'M SORRY...
IF ANYONE SEES WHAT'S ON THAT...
...MY LIFE IS OVER...

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

YEAH.

I... GUESS SHE WASN'T HURT AFTER ALL.

WAAAAAAAH!

HUFF

AKIRA OHMI, THE CUTEST BOY IN THE GRADE, HAS A DARK SIDE!

AND HE HAS A WEIRD RELATIONSHIP WITH SHIOTA-SENSEI!

AND THEY'RE GONNA CONTACT ME ABOUT MONEY TO FIX THE DOOR TOMORROW...

PUFF

HUFF

I CAN'T HANDLE ALL THIS!!

How much does a door cost?!

HUFF

THINK A LIT-TLE...

JUST...

RING RING RING RING

HUFF

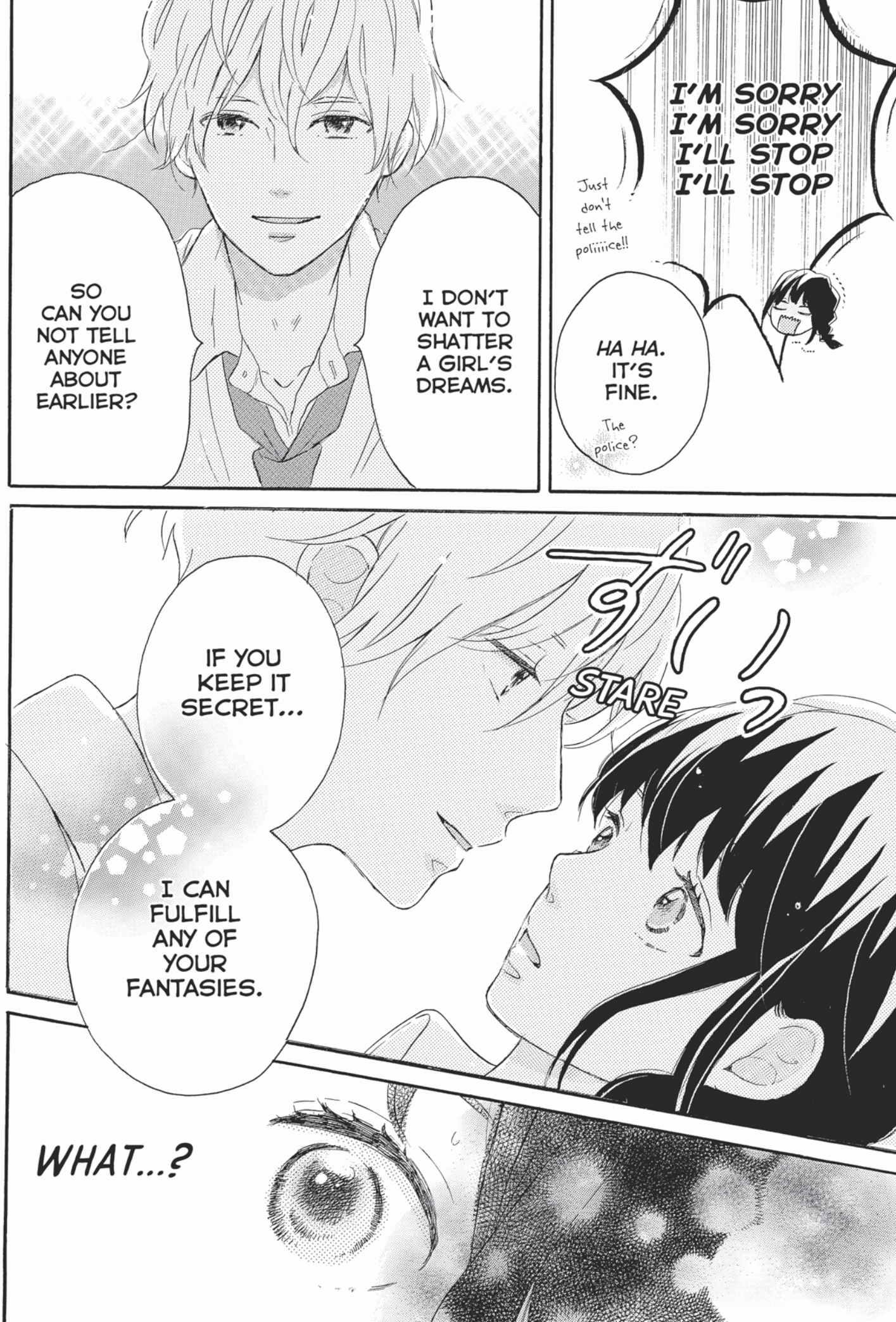
CALM ...

CALM DOWN, ELLIE.

PUFF

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.


SO CAN YOU NOT TELL ANYONE ABOUT EARLIER?
I DON'T WANT TO SHATTER A GIRL'S DREAMS.
I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'LL STOP I'LL STOP
Just don't tell the poliiiice!!
HA HA. IT'S FINE.
The police?
IF YOU KEEP IT SECRET...
I CAN FULFILL ANY OF YOUR FANTASIES.
STARE
WHAT...?

Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

Read the rest in *Lovesick Ellie* available now!

Kodansha - LOVESICK ELLIE
Lovesick Ellie © Fujimomo/Kodansha Ltd.

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**HERE'S HOW TO ENTER:** Just go to www.otakuusamagazine.com, click on "giveaway," and type your name, address and phone number and/or e-mail address and click on "submit." Or, if snail mail's your preference, write your name, address, phone number and/or email address on a postcard or sheet of paper and mail it to: OTAKU Giveaway (February 2022), 2406 Reach Road, Williamsport, PA 17701. If your name is chosen, we'll contact you, or just send you the item!

**Rules, Rules, Rules.** The official rules are on page 93.

## Sakura of America

**Sakura Pigma Sensei (3 winners)**
Pigma Sensei drawing sets include the tools you need to illustrate in the Manga/comic style. Use chisel nib inking pens for sharp expressive lines and filling in large spaces. Use fine lines for facial expressions, lettering, detailing, and bold lines to add impact and drama. Learn to draw like the pros using the same rich, black Pigma® ink that's been the trusted ink of Manga professionals for over 30 years.

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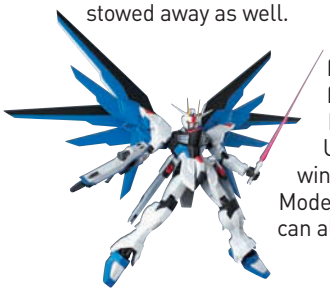
https://sakuraofamerica.com/ manga-comic

## Bandai Spirits Co., Ltd

**MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SERIES: GUNDAM EXIA (1 winner)**
The Gundam Exia as it appeared in the original "Mobile Suit Gundam 00." In addition to a GN Sword, includes the GN Longblade and Shortblade variants to expand your display possibilities! The huge GN Sword can be displayed stowed away as well.



**MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SERIES: FREEDOM GUNDAM (1 winner)**
Freedom Gundam joins the GUNDAM UNIVERSE series! Featuring opening wings and parts for replicating HiMAT Mode / Full Burst Mode. The side skirts can also stow beam saber hilts.

**MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SERIES: GUNDAM HEAVY ARMS (1 winner)**
Gundam Heavy Arms, from "Mobile Suit Gundam Wing," joins GUNDAM UNIVERSE! The figure perfectly captures its heavy look and signature massive Gatling cannons. The Beam Gatling can be slung on the back or gripped in both hands, and the Army Knife opens and closes.

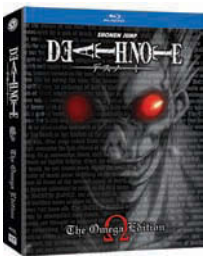
## Viz Media

**INUYASHA, SET 1 (3 WINNERS)**
Kagome Higurashi, an average ninth grader, gets pulled into an ancient well by a demon, bringing her 500 years into the past to a feudal era. There she meets Inuyasha, a half demon who seeks the Shikon Jewel to make himself a full-fledged demon. With Inuyasha and her new friends, Kagome's search for the Jewel of Four Souls begins...

**NARUTO, SET 1 (3 WINNERS)**
The little ninja that changed the world finally comes to Blu-ray! Journey back to a simpler time when Naruto was a little scamp pulling pranks and defacing monuments. A social outcast with the dreaded Nine-Tailed Fox Spirit locked inside of him, Naruto's infectious optimism and never-give-up attitude propels him towards the path of greatness. Relive the outrageous beginnings of a generation of ninja that would go on to become legends!

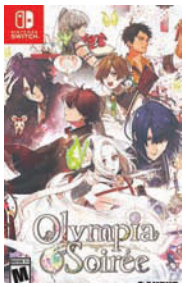
**JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE, SET 1 (LIMITED EDITION) – (3 WINNERS)**
In the eternal struggle against evil, the saga of the Joestar family is legend! Based on Hirohiko Araki's groundbreaking manga, JoJo's Bizarre Adventure follows the Joestars in a multi-generational battle to the death against the forces of darkness.

**DEATH NOTE - THE OMEGA EDITION (3 WINNERS)**




Light Yagami is a genius high school student who is about to learn about life through a book of death. When a bored shinigami, a God of Death, named Ryuk drops a black notepad called a Death Note, Light receives power over life and death with the stroke of a pen. Determined to use this dark gift for the best, Light sets out to rid the world of evil... namely, the people he believes to be evil. Should anyone hold such power? The consequences of Light's actions will set the world ablaze.

## Aksys Games




**OLYMPIA SOIREE – NINTENDO SWITCH (3 WINNERS)**
An extraordinary, all-new adventure from Otomate. Enter a rich, multi-layered world filled with characters to meet and relationships to develop. With multiple paths to explore - your every choice will determine how the story evolves. Return to the game multiple times to uncover new details and endings. An extensive tale to read, enhanced by breathtaking artwork and a stirring original musical score.

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# REAL STEEL

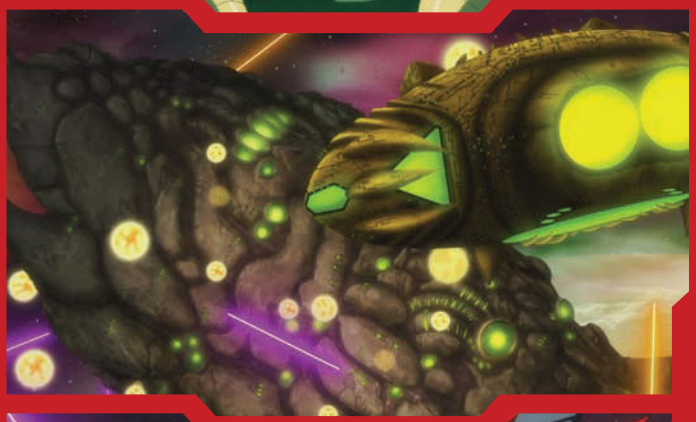
## *Getter Robo Arc* updates a mecha anime classic for a new generation.

Without the beautiful deranged mind of Ken Ishikawa to invent combining giant super robots wielding massive axes and drills in the 1970s, we'd undoubtedly be subjugated by the evolved sentient dinosaurs living under the Earth by now. For the longtime partner-in-crime of Go Nagai could reliably be counted on to take Nagai's ideas a step further. So it was that when Go Nagai created what history credits as the first piloted super robot *Mazinger Z* (with Ishikawa as assistant), Ishikawa created *Getter Robo*, in which three machines each piloted by vulgar maniacal sociopaths could improbably combine to form three entirely different robots depending on configuration. There have been several manga sequels and animated incarnations of *Getter Robo* over the past half-century, but changes were always needed in order to make it palatable for animation. For the last 25 years, every *Getter Robo* anime made has been directed by Jun Kawagoe, who has effectively become something of a steward for the Go Nagai/Ken Ishikawa legacy in the process.

With *Getter Robo Arc*, Kawagoe has declared the anime world finally prepared for the unfiltered Ken Ishikawa

By Daryl Surat

**DEPENDING ON THE OTAKU CIRCLES YOU RUN IN, GETTER ROBO ARC IS EITHER A SERIES YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD OF, OR IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, IT'S YOUR FAVORITE NEW ANIME.**



robot rampage, as it seeks to faithfully adapt the 2001 manga by the same name. Some changes are still in order, on account that *Arc* was intended to be the conclusion of the long-running saga and that Ken Ishikawa passed away after having completed what was described as "Part 1" of it. Technically, yes, this does mean that *Getter Robo Arc* is an anime sequel to a manga storyline that has never actually been animated, but luckily everything you need to know is conveyed through added flashbacks and exposition added to the anime.

Getter Rays are a mysterious cosmic energy that do whatever the plot requires of them, which generally means they not only provide a significant power source that can be repurposed for great destruction in a fashion analogous to nuclear fission; they also control evolution, enable physically implausible robot transformations by granting mechanical constructs the ability to evolve and achieve some degree of sentience, and invariably traverse the fabric of multiverse realities. The original Getter Teams as well as their supporters are no more: most either dead or vanished to some unknown plane of existence, leaving a now elderly Hayato Jin to carry on the legacy of the Saotome Institute whose specialty is harnessing Getter Rays. Despite the passing of nearly twenty years, much of planet Earth remains devastated from the battles against the subterranean Dinosaur Empire and the extraterrestrial Hyakki Empire (or "Hundred Oni Empire" if you prefer) that were ultimately defeated. Now, a new extradimensional enemy appears: biomechanical "Insects" dispatched by the Andromeda Stellaration.

It's time for the NEXT "next generation" to save the day. Takuma Nagare is the son of original series protagonist Ryoma Nagare, which if you've ever seen the original it's a doozy to accept THAT guy had a kid. But apparently, he did, and Takuma possesses not just Ryoma's exceptional fighting capability, but also Getter energy resulting from Ryoma's prolonged exposure. The obligatory "fat guy" is Baku Yamagishi, a towering precognitive warrior monk who is the brother of Tahir: a psychic Getter pilot who was never portrayed in any previous anime. Rounding out the new trio is Kamui, a human-dinosaur hybrid who just might be the first dinosaur in a Ken Ishikawa story to not be 100% evil from the get-go. That Ken Ishikawa REALLY hated dinosaurs, let me tell you.

Initially, *Getter Robo Arc* adapts its source material at the rate of about one chapter per episode, which is something of a problem because that means it takes three episodes to see the flashback explaining Takuma's motivations as well as for the gang to get in the new robot, Arc. What's more, the character artwork and animation is intentionally evocative of Ken Ishikawa's style, which many fans may find

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© Go Nagai, Ken Ishikawa / Dynamic Planning, Shin Sadome Institute

## WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

The ending credits of *Getter Robo Arc* change every few episodes, but each is done in the same style: a montage of Ishikawa's manga panels with a song by the definitive "super robot theme song" group JAM Project. Each song is a new arrangement of a previous *Getter Robo* theme that their members sang decades ago.

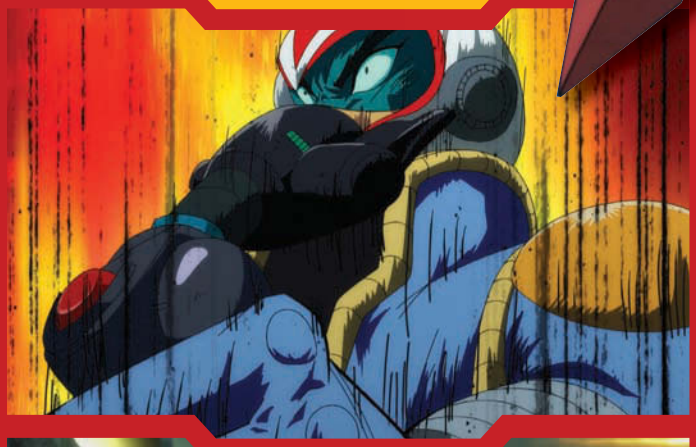
The first ending credits montage consists of panels from the original *Getter Robo*, and as such the song used is a new take on "Dragon," the song JAM Project created for 2004's *New Getter Robo*, which retained the tone of the original manga and some of the key general events. Astute viewers will observe that while most of the manga panels are from the partially redrawn/cleaned-up *Getter Robo Saga* release, those showing Musashi's heroic self-sacrifice are from the original 1974 series pages.

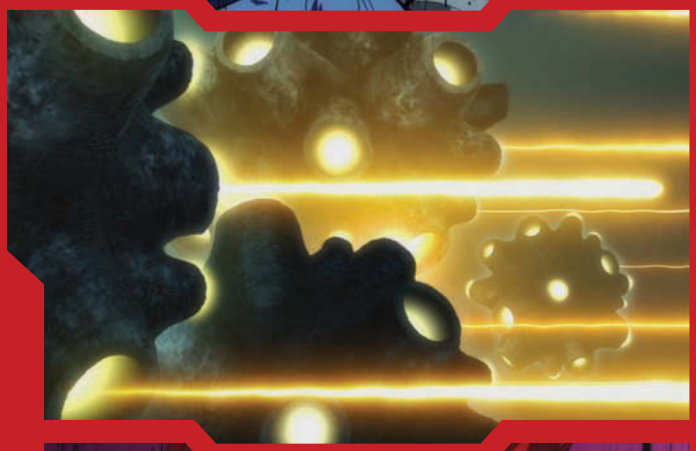
The second ED features images from the *Getter Robo Go* manga, with the song used being a 2021 edition of JAM Project's "Storm," the original of which came from the four-episode *Shin Getter Robo vs Neo Getter Robo* from 2000. (If you had to pick just one series to watch to get an idea of what this whole *Getter Robo* thing is about, that's the most digestible.) And while I write this prior to the final(?) ED, I know what the song will be: a JAM Project take on "HEATS," the iconic Hironobu Kageyama song that marked Jun Kawagoe's handling of 1998's *Getter Robo: Armageddon* from episode 4 onwards.

"janky." Fortunately, the big chunky robots always look on point once they show up, so once that third episode hits, you'd best strap yourself in because *Getter Robo Arc* does not let up, even when there are two-part "ghost/zombie invasion" stories. What's more, the anime becomes more willing to not only rearrange the order in which events of the manga are depicted but add brand-new scenes. Typically, anime-only material which wasn't present in the manga would justifiably be written off as "filler." But remember: Jun Kawagoe has been at this for around 25 years and knows his audience well. So, if you've watched those other *Getter Robo* anime, which is now easier than ever before thanks to streaming sites like HiDive and Retrocrush or Blu-Ray releases from Discotek Media, you can look forward to seeing some favorite heroes return in a manner that remains consistent with the world *Getter Robo Arc* presents. Sadly, as of this writing that means there has not been a place for Jack and Mary King and their American super robot, Texas Mack, as they may not fit the tone of what *Arc* is going for.

Depending on the otaku circles you run in, *Getter Robo Arc* is either a series you may not have heard of, or if you're like me, it's your favorite new anime of Summer 2021. Perhaps many are like me, for not only was *Getter Robo Arc* simulcast on HiDive, it was also simul-dubbed. The English dub is suitably coarse yet lyrical in keeping with the subtitle script, which captures the appeal of Ken Ishikawa's work. *Getter Robo Arc* is vulgar and crude, yes. But it also goes BIG with its ideas. Ever wonder why everything Kazuki Nakashima writes (*Kill la Kill*, *Gurren Lagann*, *Back Arrow*) escalates to such grandiose scales? It's because he's a Ken Ishikawa super-fan, and that's how *Getter Robo* would do things. Now you, too, can become such a fan! Just repeat after me: "EFF YOU, DINOSAURS!"

***Getter Robo Arc* is available from HIDIVE.**





**YOU'D BEST STRAP YOURSELF IN BECAUSE GETTER ROBO ARC DOES NOT LET UP, EVEN WHEN THERE ARE TWO-PART "GHOST/ZOMBIE INVASION" STORIES.**

By Michael Goldstein

# The Life Aquatic!

## *The Aquatope on White Sand* is an anime designed to take you on a tropical getaway.

Fuuka Miyazawa is a member of a successful idol group. But her own compassion leads to relenting her position to her younger idol member, which ultimately gets weaponized into sidelining her. With her dream shattered in pieces, and without any kind of support from her own parents, she packs up her Tokyo belongings and runs away to the remote and beautiful Japanese island of Okinawa, where she meets high school student Kukuru Misakino, who serves as the acting director of the Gama Gama Aquarium, which is set to close in a month. While Kukuru is doing everything in her power to save the place she loves, everyone around her has just accepted the aquarium's fate. Thankfully, her tenacity is pretty contagious, and soon enough, Fuuka decides to pitch in to help fix up a broken dream while simultaneously trying to move on after hers.

If you're familiar with P.A. Works, you might have heard about their so-called working series, which tells three different stories about people and their jobs: *Hanasaku Iroha* (2011), which centers around the workers at a Taisho period hot spring inn; *Shirobako* (2014–15), which dives into the hectic industry of anime production; and *Sakura Quest* (2017), which deals heavily with generating tourism for an economically struggling village. It was a pretty successful trilogy, with each series having its own strengths and messages. *The Aquatope on White Sand*: *The Two Girls Met in the Ruins of Damaged Dream* (henceforth just called *Aquatope*), which began airing during the summer 2021 season, seems to be continuing this trend, this time using a run-down aquarium as its backdrop.

© project Tingara

That being said, *Aquatope* feels more like a slice-of-life show than an official fourth member of the "working" series. The show itself tends to hone in on the smaller things in life. Whether it be the long shots of breathtaking scenery or daily shrine offerings to shaved ice or just an old-fashioned barbecue on the hot sand; it's the idea of staying in a place you can find peace in rather than wealth of fame. Gama Gama itself might be considered a small thing, but not to Kukuru, as it's the closest thing she has to her deceased parents. For Fuuka, it's a sanctuary to meditate on her fall from grace. It's may not be big, but it clearly matters. Even the death of a single fish hits our characters hard, but they're allowed to mourn the loss. Grief is grief no matter what form it takes.

In fact, the primary approach to *Aquatope*'s storytelling lies in its usage of physical locations, linking them thematically to personal aspirations. The series makes great use of the symbolism in its settings in such a manner that the concept of metaphor ceases to exist. Location becomes an extension of personality. For example, at one point, Fuuka finds herself in an empty room, representing the absence of hope after her dreams of idolhood are dashed. You can also see it in the usage of the quiet, coastal town backdrop, which, in contrast to the usual idea of an idyllic escape from our troubles, replicate Fuuka's broken dreams; the crumbling neighborhood in which the Gama Gama Aquarium remains stand against the backdrop of a calm sea. In a way, it offers her protection alongside other objects in desperate need of repair. With Kukuru, the Gama Gama Aquarium, an environment that's slowly breaking down, is a space designed to reveal her inner psychology. And that's just the tip of the (crumbling) iceberg.

What helps punctuate these locations is, naturally, the gorgeous visuals we've naturally come to expect from P.A. Works. If we could dedicate an entire issue to just screenshots taken from this shows, we'd do it in a heartbeat. Much attention is given to such things as the silent stillness of an empty room, the play of light on a daylit ocean, the sun setting within the clouds, the Milky Way dancing across the night sky, even passing-by schools of fish—it's simply breathtaking. It's not the first series by the studio to dabble in sea imagery—that title belongs to *Nagi-Asu: A Lull in the Sea*—it is by far the prettiest to look at.

Much like its predecessors in the P.A. Works working series, *Aquatope*—currently streaming on Crunchyroll—functions as an excellent slow-burn character study and a leisurely slice-of-life story. As of this writing 9 out of 24 episodes have aired; so far there hasn't been anything too challenging or upsetting yet, but the hard deadline

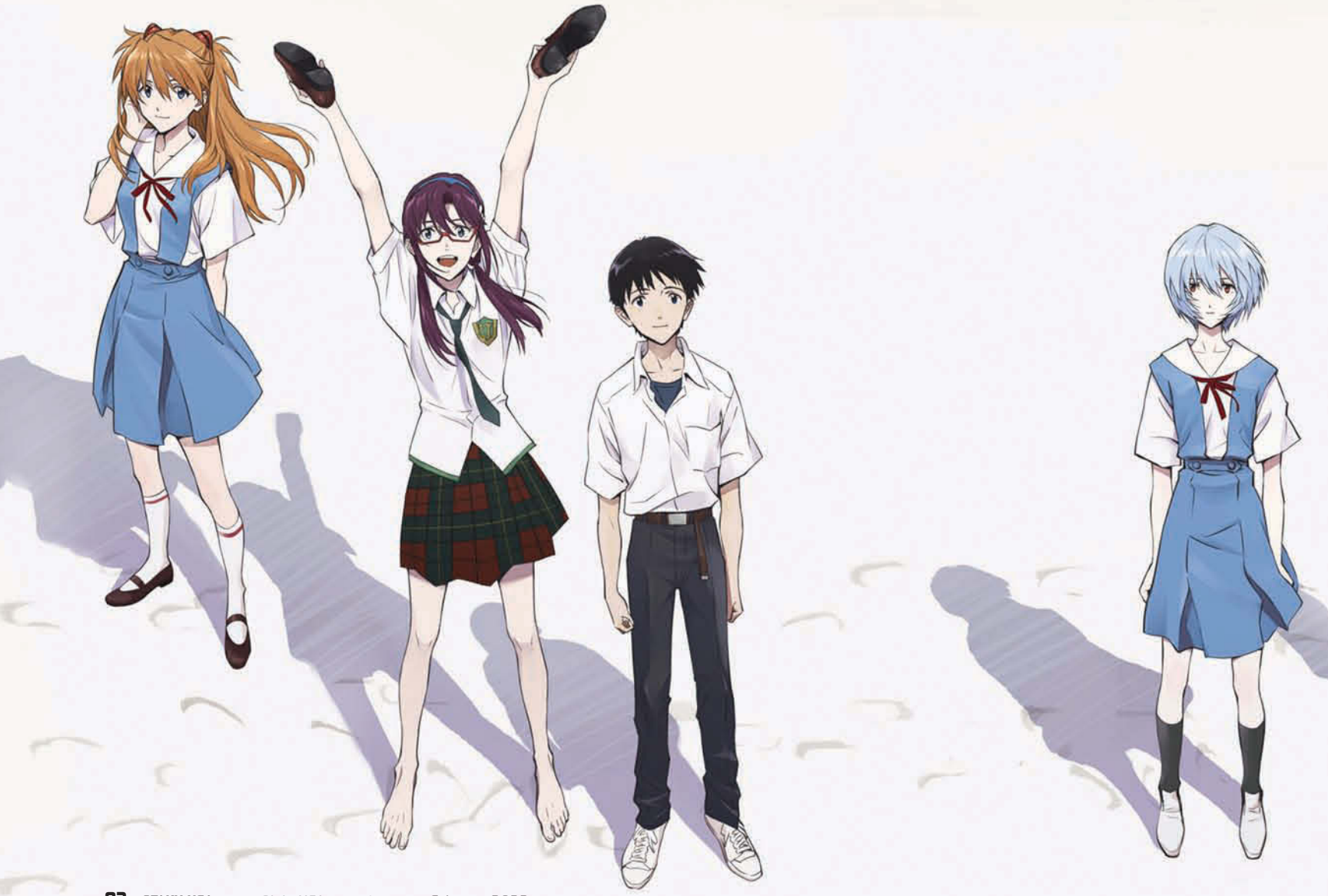
© project Tingara

for the aquarium's closure looms closer ad closer. Perhaps this will be the central drama in the second half. At this point, it's hard to tell where the central relationships are headed—it could go in multiple different ways, really. However, it actually bears a strong resemble to a similar P.A. Works production from 2018—*IRODUKU: The World in Colors* (also available for streaming on Crunchyroll), which was an emotionally resonate production about healing through the help of a community; mutual support; and the importance of knowing that your talents have a positive impact on others. At the moment, it's perfectly approachable, even if it makes you aches to get on a tropical getaway even more, especially in today's current climate.

***The Aquatope on White Sand* is available from Crunchyroll.**

Much attention in The Aquatope on White Sand is given to such things as the silent stillness of an empty room, the play of light on a daylit ocean, the sun setting within the clouds, even passing-by schools of fish—its simply breathtaking.

# *Evangelion 3.0+1.0:* Thrice *Upon a Time* arrives at last to take anime



to the next level.

# THE FINAL CHALLENGE!

By J.L. Carrozza

**In 2006,** Hideaki Anno and his new company khara announced the production of the *Rebuild of Evangelion* series; a cinematic readaptation of his most famous creation. Intended to be finished in 2008, neither the creator nor his unwitting fans knew what they were getting themselves into. The final film saw numerous delays in production and release that stretched anticipation out for the greater part of a decade. While the fourth *Evangelion* film was scheduled for 2013 and then 2015, Hideaki Anno chose to temporarily abandon production for the best form of therapy: directing a Godzilla movie. After the release of *Shin Godzilla* in 2016, Anno bitterly picked up the task of making a fourth *Evangelion Rebuild*. A release date was announced: June 27th, 2020. *Evangelion 3.0+1.0: Thrice Upon a Time* was to fittingly open not long before the Tokyo Olympics. We all know what happened next. COVID-19 emerged, and before long the world was plunged into a still-ongoing pandemic. *Evangelion: Thrice Upon a Time* was delayed to January 2021. This wound up buying Anno and his team more time to finish it. Due to COVID, *Evangelion: Thrice Upon a Time* was again delayed. It finally opened on March 8th, 2021. In lieu of a theatrical release worldwide, *Evangelion: Thrice Upon a Time* was put on Amazon Prime this summer.

My first impression of *Evangelion 3.0+1.0: Thrice Upon a Time* is a simple desire to watch its flurry of visually orgasmic apocalyptic images again. In a way, *Thrice Upon a Time* feels like the ultimate Hideaki Anno movie: a collection of pop otaku references melded with his best apocalypse imagery to date. Anno wears his tokusatsu film nerdom on his sleeve; a soundtrack cue from Toho's *Star Wars*-inspired *The War in Space* (1977) is even used in a major sequence. As with *Evangelion 3.0,* the Wunder sequences heavily invoke *Space Battleship Yamato*. If the nihilistic *The End of Evangelion* parallels *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato* (1978), *Thrice Upon a Time* is quite evocative of *Final Yamato* (1983). Both are two and a half hour- plus event films that definitely ended a franchise.

As in *The End of Evangelion*, Shinji spends much of the film's first reels in a catatonic state. The story takes some satisfying turns. The humans who survived Unit 01's catastrophic reawakening in film two, including many of Shinji's now grown-up classmates, live in a communal society given civilian aid by Misato's group WILLE. Their compound is protected from Gendo Ikari's apocalyptic horrors by a force field ala *Attack on Titan.* The new Rei introduced in the last film is once again humanized before meeting with a heart-

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breaking end; a moment as existentially terrifying as anything in the franchise thus far. Asuka spends much of these scenes lounging around in panties. Yet the "fan service" that was once tantalizing is a bit disturbing in a woke world.

Most impressive is the animation in *Thrice Upon a Time*; a jaw-dropping and undeniable technical achievement. Its images are so beautifully detailed that they bring the medium to a new height. Anno and fellow directors Kazuya Tsurumaki (*FLCL*), Mahiro Maeda (*Animatrix, Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo*) and Katsuichi Nakayama (*Gurren Lagann*) show an astounding mastery. *Thrice Upon a Time* barrages its viewer with one jaw-droppingly animated visual after another. WILLE's assault on NERV could be the most visually beautiful sequence in anime, period. The giant Lilith/Rei is brought back and executed even better than in *The End of Evangelion*, given unsettling live-action features.

The final reel goes into a grander level of meta than ever before seen in *Evangelion*. Gendo and Shinji have a tokusatsu-style Eva duel before sitting down to an existential conversation in the usual "nervous breakdown subway car". Kaworu Nagisa reveals what fans have always suspected since 2007. Hearing the thickly Japanese accented voices of Megumi Ogata and Megumi Hayashibara say "Neon Genesis" takes this feeling of meta to the extreme. Even the much-maligned TV ending of *Evangelion* is paid homage to with a scene consisting of deliberately unfinished animation. Love it or hate it, *Evangelion 3.0+1.0: Thrice Upon a Time* is an awe-inspiring experience. Like its predecessor *The End of Evangelion*, it's a film that will be obsessively studied and analyzed by a new generation of fans on both sides of the Pacific.

***Evangelion 3.0+1.0: Thrice Upon a Time* is available from Amazon Prime Video.**

## Hideaki Anno: The Final Challenge of Evangelion

*Hideaki Anno: The Final Challenge of Evangelion* is a two-part TV documentary that aired on NHK and manages to be almost as interesting as *Evangelion 3.0+1.0* itself. NHK was given unprecedented access to the enigmatic creator of *Evangelion* and his company khara for around three and a half years. Anno is an eccentric perfectionist and control freak known for being hard-driving with his team.

At times in this documentary, you see Anno's inner child; an enthusiastic, tokusatsu and anime-loving boy like a kid in a candy shop as he directs. At another point, as Anno exhaustedly sleeps in his office after an all night work session, he finally looks like an old man. Later scenes of this documentary show you how Anno handled COVID and how workarounds were developed to finish the movie. *Hideaki Anno: The Final Challenge of Evangelion* is a must-see portrait of one of anime's greatest and most eccentric luminaries.

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## Revisiting the Rebuilds

With the release of *Evangelion 3.0+1.0: Thrice Upon a Time*, now is a better time than ever to reflect upon the previous three entries. The first film, *Evangelion 1.0: You Are (Not) Alone* (2007), is a faithful adaptation of the first six episodes of the original TV series. Overall, *Evangelion 1.0: You Are (Not) Alone* is decent but lacks the remarkability of the series.

With *Evangelion 2.0: You Can (Not) Advance*, the franchise starts to cover new ground. It feels the most satisfying of the first three Rebuilds as it balances show material with a handful of new twists. Its opening introduces the new pilot Mari Illustrious Makinami, who feels created to sell merchandise. The battle scene against the angel Sahaquiel is stunningly animated with kinetic action, a genuine highlight. It diverges from the narrative of the show as Anno plays his ace as provocateur.

*Evangelion 3.0: You Can (Not) Redo* is a different story, literally and figuratively. At the end of *Evangelion 2.0*, in the "special preview," Anno promised his audiences a completely different film. In the end, *Evangelion 3.0* is a beautiful but vapid film that's more rewarding as a prologue to *Thrice Upon a Time*. It contains some of the most sophisticated apocalyptic imagery in the franchise thus far. Still, *Evangelion 3.0: You Can (Not) Redo* is an aggrandized toy commercial, though a visually beautiful one.

THE ANIMATION IN THRICE UPON A TIME IS A JAW-DROPPING AND UNDENIABLE TECHNICAL ACHIEVEMENT. ITS IMAGES ARE SO BEAUTIFULLY DETAILED THAT THEY BRING THE MEDIUM TO A NEW HEIGHT.

# The latest season of *My Next Life as a Villainess* brings new problems, new foes, and new doom flags.

Everyone loves a villain. They have the most fun, after all. They're unfettered by morals and thus can make wild decisions a hero wouldn't. And they're free to chew all the delicious scenery they want.

But in the case of Catarina Claes, we love a villain because she's *not.* The protagonist of *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* did all she could to shun her fated evil ways, knowing it could literally mean life or death if she failed. But a combination of panicked self-preservation, *otome* game knowledge, and genuine goodwill took her from doomed villainess to oblivious, lovable harem protagonist.

Catarina and her "friends" (as she thinks of them) are back for a second season in *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! X.* And where Season 1 was focused mostly on tracking the events of game-turned-reality *Fortune Lover,* the new season shows us that Catarina's new *isekai* world is more full of life, magic, and intrigue than any of us expected.

**Fortune Lover**

Satoru Yamaguchi's original light novel series is yet another reincarnation *isekai,* of the sort where our recently-deceased hero finds themselves in the world of their favorite game. For the unnamed present-day girl of our story, that game is the dating sim *Fortune Lover.* Players take on the role of Maria, a lower-class girl with powerful Light magic, as she navigates life and love at a

# GET IN

© Yamaguchi Satoru, Ichijinsha / HameFura Production Committee

# THE GAME!

By Kara Dennison

## OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

Wish you could play *Fortune Lover*? You can! ... sort of. The Japanese Blu-ray releases of *My Next Life as a Villainess* came with short trial releases of the fictional game's four main arcs. But for the real otome game experience, there's *The Pirate Known as "Trouble"* for the Nintendo Switch. This new game sees Catarina captured by pirates on a cruise ship—an event which, in the world of the series, was cut from *Fortune Lover* and recorded only in the fictional game's fan book.

prestigious academy. While there, she has her choice of four noble young men to pursue. But there are rivals at every turn, including main villainess Catarina Claes. Fortunately for you, the player, Catarina is either killed or exiled in every ending. Unfortunately for our heroine, she's been reincarnated as Catarina.

A bump on the head as a child brings back her past-life memories, giving her a few years of headway before the events of the story begin. With her knowledge of the game (as far as she played before she died, at least), she settles in to cancel out her incoming doom flags, as well as teaching herself to farm. Gotta have food, after all.

What she doesn't realize, though, is that by cancelling out her flags, she's removing the negative motivations of all the characters around her. No bullying? No family shame? No rivalry? Suddenly everyone's much happier and more confident in themselves. Thus, she wins the hearts of everyone: all the love interests, all the rivals, and even player character Maria. And for good measure, she thwarts the secret route.

So where is there to go from here? Quite a ways, actually.

### Beyond the Game

*My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! X* begins with Catarina settling in to her new life, free of fears of doom flags. She's past the events of *Fortune Lover*, meaning she can just have a good time with all her very good and close friends. But the world is much bigger than *Fortune Lover*, and there are new challenges awaiting her at every turn for which she has no guidebook.

For starters, she's still engaged to Prince Geordo, and he's well aware of how much competition he has. To evade marriage for as long as possible—as marrying a prince would mean an extremely boring life sitting on a throne all day—Catarina has made her way into the Department of Magic. So has Maria, and so have some other familiar (and less familiar) faces. While Catarina's magic is still pretty weak, her friendliness and curiosity make her a surprisingly ideal candidate.

As her worldview expands, we look more into the lives of the characters she's influenced. Not just her love interests and rivals-turned-love-interests, either. Geordo and Alan have older brothers with goals and concerns (and fiancées) of their own. Secondary and tertiary characters reveal full life stories, hopes and dreams, and far more than you'd ever expect to see from a background sprite in a dating sim.

That's the great joy of *My Next Life as a Villainess X:* yes, there's more of Catarina obliviously improving people's lives. But we get to see the far-reaching effects of her kindness and hard work. We delve into the minutiae of this world, and we see just how full and vibrant and dramatic it is. Of course, that's not always for the better... after all, just like successful anime, successful games can have sequels.

**Catarina's World**

The joy of *My Next Life as a Villainess* is the same sort of joy we feel in series like *Ascendance of a Bookworm* and *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level.* Reincarnated in a fantasy world and possessed of magic and a new identity, our heroes don't become vengeful or power-hungry. Rather, they set out to fix something. Whether it's overall quality of life, personal shortcomings, or their own destiny, it's a personal journey they could never have taken otherwise.

Catarina herself will never realize just how good her situation is. Her fictional counterpart was written to be a terrible person, damaging lives wherever she went. That's not our Catarina's style—not once she has her past-life memories back, at least. Her doom flags had all (or at least mostly) fallen down long before her day of reckoning. She changed herself, and her world, for the better. And now she has *so* many boyfriends and girlfriends, whether she knows it or not.

*Isekai* is largely about wish fulfillment. Catarina's situation—one where being true to herself and being a good person will ensure a safe and happy life surrounded by people who love her—would be a dream come true for most of us. Season 2 may bring new problems, new foes, and new doom flags. But, whether she realizes it or not, she's got everything she needs to survive.

***My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* is available from Crunchyroll.**

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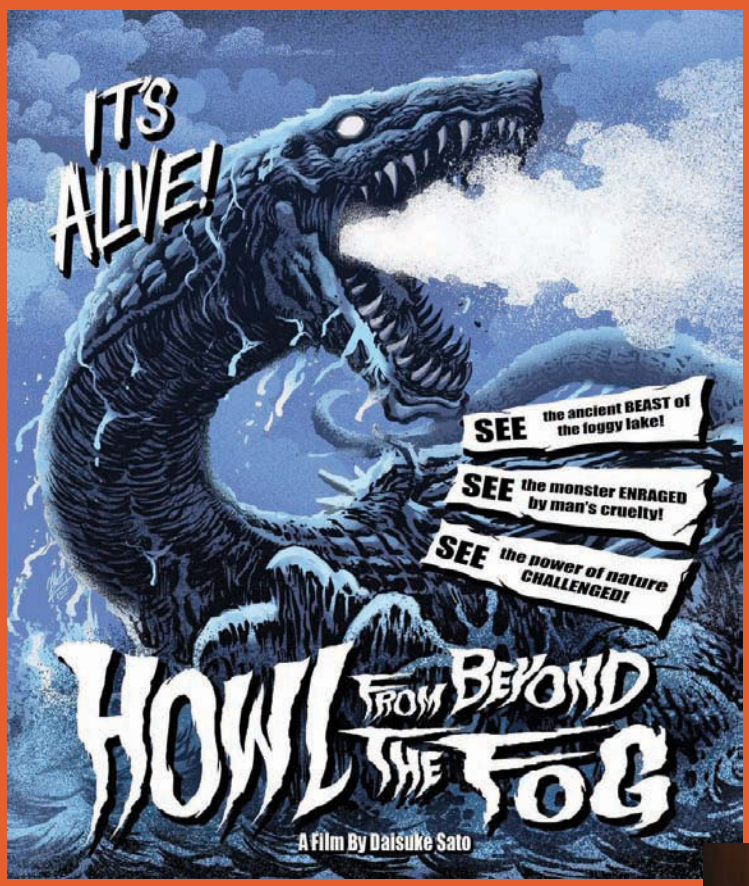
## ON THE VERGE OF DOOM

Catarina was lucky to have a head start on averting her doom. But what if she hadn't? The spinoff manga *On the Verge of Doom!* takes our heroine right down to the wire, as she regains her past-life memories as she enters her first year of school. After 15 years of villainous behavior, without the friendships she forged and precautions she took in the main series, will she still be able to avoid death or exile?

**REINCARNATED IN A FANTASY WORLD, OUR HEROES DON'T BECOME VENGEFUL OR POWER-HUNGRY. RATHER, THEY SET OUT TO FIX SOMETHING. WHETHER IT'S OVERALL QUALITY OF LIFE, PERSONAL SHORTCOMINGS, OR THEIR OWN DESTINY, IT'S A PERSONAL JOURNEY THEY COULD NEVER HAVE TAKEN OTHERWISE.**

# Spook Howl Return

## Sea creatures, angry stone gods, and yokai monsters



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**ORIGINALLY RELEASED**
2019

**RUNNING TIME**
35 Minutes

### HOWL FROM BEYOND THE FOG

In production since 2017, *Howl From Beyond the Fog* is now finally available on Amazon Prime and DVD. It was well worth the wait. *Howl From Beyond the Fog*, alongside the likes of Kiyotaka Taguchi's *Gehara* (2009) and Anno and Higuchi's *Giant God Warrior Appears in Tokyo* (2012), is one of the very finest short subject tokusatsu movies. Inspired by Ray Bradbury's *The Fog Horn*, director Daisuke Sato singlehandedly transforms the Japanese special-effects art form into a viable medium of its own. Akin to Henson's *The Dark Crystal*, the film is a practical effects-splendor with a completely miniaturized world that requires little suspension of disbelief. Drawing heavy influence from Go Nagai's *X-Bomber* (*Star Fleet*), it boasts an all-puppet cast and an aesthetic like *Thunderbirds* via *bunraku*. Sato's film feels like both a proof of concept begging to be made into a feature film and a proposal on how to save a dying medium. As its own distinctive craft separate from dramatic live action films, tokusatsu could have a strong future in the Japanese film industry. Sato also shows immense reverence to the medium's past. Suitmaking veteran Keizo Murase made the monster Nebula's impressive suits and puppets. Murase is an industry legend, his first job being on Eiji Tsuburaya's unit at Toho helping make *Varan* in 1958. Set painter Fuchimu Shimakura who has been making painted tokusatsu set backdrops (called "horizonts") since the Tsuburaya days also paints *Howl*'s skies.

The execution isn't perfect, with some iffy greenscreen work and a few moments that could have used another pass in post-production. Yet the film is utterly loaded with hauntingly beautiful images and lyrical phantasmagoria owing its lineage as far back as the recently re-discovered *Princess Kaguya* (1936); Tsuburaya's first film to use special effects techniques. *Howl*'s protagonist is even unambiguously named Eiji. This is not without some nuance, however, as Eiji Tsuburaya also grew in *Meiji* Japan in similar turn-of-the-century surroundings to what's seen in *Howl. Howl From Beyond the Fog*'s finale is particularly stunning. The monster Nebula's climactic rampage evokes every one that came before it from Godzilla to Mothra to Gamera to Majin. Yet somehow, it still feels original and fresh. If, as our editor-in-chief would say, Shinji Higuchi is the Gen-X answer to Eiji Tsuburaya, perhaps we've found our Millennial equivalent in Sato. It's a shame that the marketing and festival run of this film has been stunted by COVID. If you like Godzilla or any manner of tokusatsu movies or shows, *Howl From Beyond the Fog* is a must-see and comes with the highest recommendation. At 35 minutes, it's an easy commitment, too.

—J.L. Carrozza

# RETURN OF DAIMAJIN

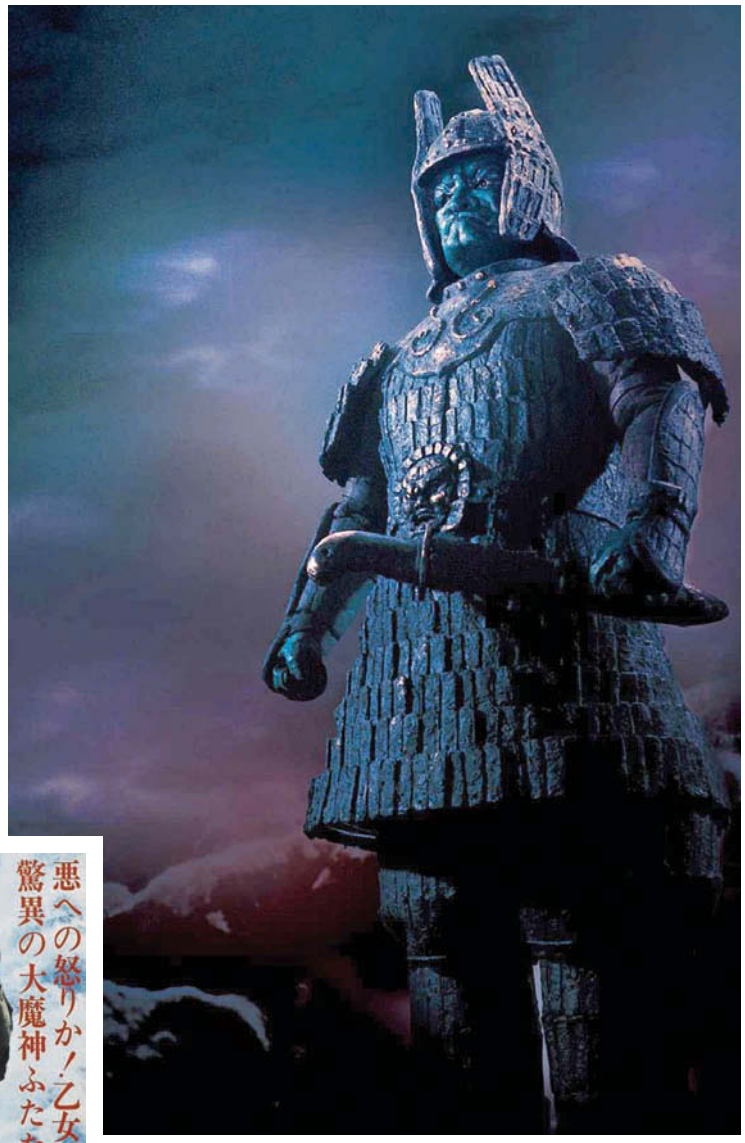
**DISTRIBUTOR**
Arrow Video

**ORIGINALLY RELEASED**
1966

**RUNNING TIME**
79 Minutes

Daiei Kyoto's *Return of Daimajin*, directed by Kenji Misumi (*Lone Wolf and Cub: Baby Cart at the River Styx*) was the second installment in the classic *Daimajin* series. Once again, Yoshiyuki Kuroda helmed the special-effects unit and Fujio Morita shot for both directors. *Return of Daimajin* is a fairly standard *jidai-geki* with striking cinematography by Morita. This time the Majin statue resides at a lake, and another nasty warlord (Takashi Kanda) conquers and oppresses two lakeside villages, one of them headed by a kindly young nobleman played by *Gamera vs. Barugon*'s Kojiro Hongo. The villains show a little more craftiness this time around and succeed in destroying the statue. The work of Kuroda is as good as in the first film and he and Morita hit another home run with their FX unit. Kuroda and Morita used precise mathematical calculations to determine the scale of their sequences. Per Morita's love of atmospheric particles in the air, heavy amounts of fog, made from paraffin, was dispensed throughout the sets with giant fans. The destruction of the Majin statue was largely done on a full-sized set with explosives in steel cylinders. It's a different approach to how Eiji Tsuburaya would have done it, with miniatures, high frame-rate shooting and lots of gunpowder.

In tokusatsu industry culture, successfully staging a practical flood is considered a rite of passage for a special effects director. As Majin comes to life, he parts the lake ala Charlton Heston's Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, a major influence on this scene. Yoshiyuki Kuroda stuns with this sequence, one of the best tokusatsu water sequences ever filmed. It's nearly if not equal to Hollywood quality and looks even better than John P. Fulton's work in *The Ten Commandments* yet on a much slimmer budget. Gas cylinders filled with compressed nitrogen were pumped into the water to create the effect of Majin emerging from the lake. A genuine waterfall was filmed from both sides and composited into the sequence. Kuroda had to go to Tokyo Daiei and use their optical printer to create this composite. Daiei Kyoto didn't have one and the shot was simply too complex to create through masking and double exposure. Kuroda and particularly Morita were actually quite disappointed with this sequence. Morita felt the straight lines on top of the water were unconvincing. They also wanted a sequence that was less visually beautiful and more viscerally scary.



Another stunning shot features Majin tearing down the wall of the warlord's fortress, revealing Misumi's live action set. This was Fujio Morita's idea. The miniature work is stellar. The shots of Majin destroying a miniature castle had to be refilmed as they didn't crumble properly. Kuroda's unit worked through the night to rebuild and repair it. The effect of muskets being fired at Majin was created with firecrackers encased in rubber bullets which for Riki Hashimoto was quite harrowing. Others, meant to explode in midair, were medicine capsules filled with gunpowder. These were lit and shot upward through small cylinders. Morita was frustrated by errors in scale of some of the final shots of Majin looking at Lady Sayuri (Shiho Fujimura). He had wanted the water to bubble up and consume Majin. This effect proved too difficult and time-consuming to execute, so a simple optical wipe was used instead. Overall, Misumi and Kuroda don't quite have the creative synergy as the latter had with Kimiyoshi Yasuda and *Return of Daimajin* lacks the novelty of the first film. Once again, however, the final reel is jaw-dropping. Director Misumi would be much better known for having made several entries in the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series, later edited into *Shogun Assassin* years after his death. The final entry, *White Heaven in Hell*, was incidentally helmed by Yoshiyuki Kuroda.

—J.L. Carrozza

# YOKAI MONSTERS: SPOOK WARFARE

**DISTRIBUTOR**
Arrow Video

**ORIGINALLY RELEASED**
1968

**RUNNING TIME**
79 Minutes

By 1968, the mid '60s Monster Boom was winding down. Thanks to the popularity of the manga *Gege no Kitaro* by Shigeru Mizuki and its anime adaptation that began airing in January, there was a brief "Yokai Boom." For their next series of films combining monsters and *jidai-geki* theatrics, Daiei Kyoto sought to cash in on this. Little known in Western culture, *yokai* are monstrous ghosts of sorts; malevolent Shinto spirits who reside throughout Japan. Ala *Pokémon,* which the concept of yokai probably had a hand in influencing, each region of Japan has different local monsters. The first of Daiei's Yokai films was *100 Monsters,* released in March of 1968 on a double bill with *Gamera vs. Viras*. For the Yokai films, much of the Majin trilogy's creative talent was brought back. This included special effects director Yoshiyuki Kuroda. For the follow-up film, *Spook Warfare*, Kuroda was put in charge of both the drama and FX units. In August, Toho had released *Destroy All Monsters*; a large-scale all-star send-off for the Monster Boom. *Destroy All Monsters* influenced the more monster-focused direction of *Spook Warfare*. *Spook Warfare* draws more direct influence from *Gege no Kitaro,* taking its very name and basic concept from one of its 1966 storylines. In it, Kitaro recruits an army of Japanese yokai to battle a group of Universal-style foreign monsters that include a vampire, a werewolf and Frankenstein.

*Spook Warfare* is overall the highlight of the three Yokai films. The first film, *100 Monsters*, directed by Kimiyoshi Yasuda, has more of an old school J-Horror vibe ala the works of Nobuo Nakagawa. Kuroda's direction on *Spook Warfare* gets closer to a tokusatsu monster movie. Similar to *Kitaro*, the premise involves a small army of Japanese yokai battling Daimon, a vampiric Babylonian demon like a cross between Dracula and Pazuzu. Majin's Riki Hashimoto plays him and his cold, dead stare is every bit as unsettling as Christopher Lee's.

Some of the *yokai* are quite distinctive. They include *Abura Sumashi*, a grey-skinned humanoid in straw clothes, the famed river monster *Kappa* and the *Karakasa* or *Kasa Obake* who is essentially a monster umbrella. The *Rokuro Kubi,* played by siren Ikuko Mori, is particularly memorable, a woman with the ability to extend her neck to serpentine lengths. This gives Kuroda and his unit ample opportunity for some pretty astounding in-camera FX. The yokai are even more numerous than in *100 Monsters*, though most of the suits from the previous film

are brought back along with ones scavenged from other Daiei productions like the *Suzunosuke Akado* films. Masao Yagi's Equis Productions was given a lot of work to do on both films, crafting dozens of distinct apparitions.

The special effects are considerably improved from the first film with inventive trick photography throughout that is director Kuroda at top form. *Spook Warfare* cuts right to the chase with an impressive opening with superb miniature work including Babylonian ruins and a European ship. The execution is rather innovative. As Kuroda helmed both the FX and actor scenes in one unit, the ghoulish pantomime monstrousness is well integrated with period film theatrics. The finale, where Daimon grows to a giant size while battling the *yokai*, features some of Kuroda's most sophisticated process and optical work that feels phantasmagorical in its intensity. The double exposure processes pioneered by Daiei Kyoto's FX unit on films like *The Invisible Demon* (1960) is combined with the monster effects perfected on *Majin*. The results are stunning, with numerous complex and multi-layered visual effects shots and optical processing just as advanced as Eiji Tsuburaya's at Toho. As with the Majin films, there's an excellent sense of scale with giant Daimon claws and feet employed. Overall, besides being a practical effects marvel, *Spook Warfare* is a particularly fun entry in the Yokai series. Double-billed with Noriaki Yuasa's *Snake Girl and the Silver Haired Witch*, it would be followed by 1969's *Along with Ghosts*. *Spook Warfare* would lend a lot of inspiration to Tomoo Haraguchi's *Sakuya, Slayer of Demons* (2000), featuring special effects by Shinji Higuchi who fully channels Kuroda. It would also be loosely remade by Takashi Miike as *The Great Yokai War* in 2005.

*—J.L. Carrozza is the author of* SF: The Japanese Science Fiction Film Encyclopedia *and the upcoming* Japanese Special Effects Cinema: Godfathers of Tokusatsu.



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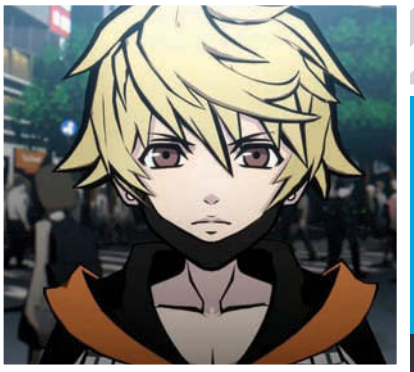
# NEO: The World Ends With You

## Welcome back to the 'buya!



**PUBLISHER**
Square Enix

**DEVELOPER**
Square Enix, h.a.n.d.

**SYSTEM(S)**
PS4, Switch

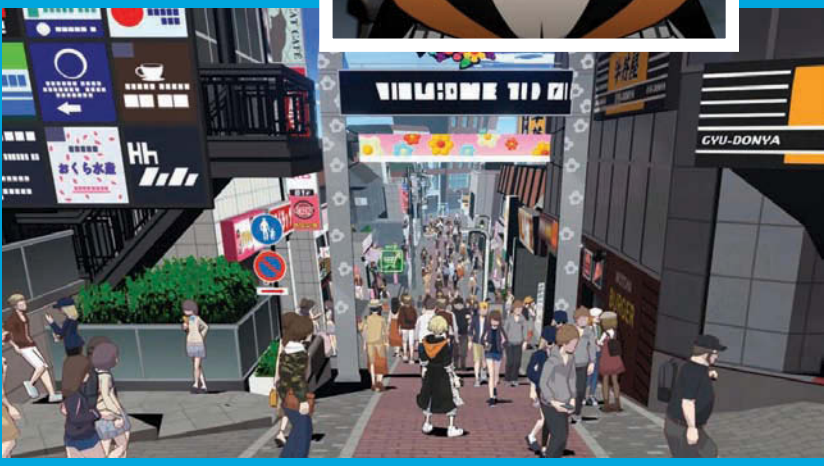
**RATING**
T

The long-awaited, dreamed-about sequel to *The World Ends With You* is finally here and ready to make some noise! Beginning development after the *TWEWY* remake in 2018, Square Enix's *NEO: The World Ends With You* takes what players loved about the first and modifies it for today's standards.

Long-time fans will enjoy the nods to the 2007 DS game, but the sequel still embraces newcomers thanks to its manageable gameplay and some fresh faces. Like the original, *NEO: The World Ends With You* centers itself around a team of misfits—Rindo, Fret, and Nagi—who find themselves in the twisted Reapers' Game, a 7-day game of survival where teams battle monsters called Noise and each other to avoid "erasure." If they win, they are promised another chance at life.

Replicated from the first installment, *NEO* also takes place in the heart of a limbo-like Shibuya (now more modernized thanks to a 14-year gap), deeply rooting itself in the city's culture; paying homage to its street fashion, food, and music. Upon the first few minutes of playing, you pick up from the modern tech and gen z lingo, naturally inserting itself in each conversation, that the designers and localizers meticulously worked to make the game feel set in the present day—a feat that should not go unacknowledged.

What made the original DS game so memorable, aside from its unique style and story, was the dual-screen battles that required some serious hand-eye coordination and then some. While *NEO* plays on just one screen now, it still captures part of the allure of its predecessor by assigning collectable ability pins to specific controller buttons for each team member—aiding in your quest to defeat Noise and survive another day. Each pin you collect has its own psychs, affinities, and rules that must be analyzed to better understand how to create synergistic attacks between characters. Finding the best pin combo is by run of trial-and-error, as well as swapping them out based on your next enemy. To get a groove going you need to sync up your moves in a well-timed cadence by tapping, holding, or using a powered-up press and release tactic to unleash an ultra-powerful attack. This can be rather challenging at first, making battles feel chaotic, but the trick is to learn how to control multiple team members at a time and dodging attacks without completely depleting the pin gauge, otherwise, you're left wide open for retaliation.



After the first couple of days, battles do begin to feel repetitive, but the game switches it up with the use of psychic abilities that help solve various quests. Rindo can turn back time to change the outcome of a day, Nagi can dive deep within a person's subconscious and remove lingering Noise, and Fret has a useful remind ability that triggers people's memory. There are even a few mini-games sprinkled in for good measure. And that's not all. Between battles and quests, you'll need to boost your stats by chowing down at local eateries and shopping the hottest wares at designer boutiques, allowing players to passively experience a tantalizing virtual Shibuya in 3D (notably my favorite part of the game). All of the above elements combined make *NEO: The World Ends With You* an enthralling JRPG, deserving of a spot in your games library.

*The World Ends With You* series, like Shibuya itself, has grown up and evolved, but is still heavily influenced by its past. *NEO* may not be seen as revolutionary in its execution, but it really serves as a sequel to help further the original's plot, all while holding its own, allowing it to function as a standalone if you haven't played *TWEWY*. Should you however find interest in its backstory, I highly recommend checking out the anime adaptation on Funimation (though not required). *NEO*'s unforgettable graffiti-inspired art style, immersive 3D landscape, and partly-new-partly-remixed OST bound to have you bobbing your head to the beat secures it as one of the hottest games this season for returning fans and newbies alike.

—Brianna Fox-Priest

# No More Heroes III

## FU Fighters

**PUBLISHER**
Marvelous

**DEVELOPER**
Grasshopper Manufacture

**SYSTEM(S)**
Switch

**RATING**
M

In 2019, *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes* brought everyone's favorite otaku and pro assassin Travis Touchdown back, but not in the way everyone expected. *Strikes Again* ended up being somewhat of a middling appetizer before the main course that would be *No More Heroes III*, and now fans finally have the sequel they've been wanting for the better part of a decade. The third entry in the series is more over the top and buckwild than ever, making it easy to see past—and perhaps even wholly embrace—the shaky foundation on which it's built.

Let's get this out of the way first, because it's something you're going to hear about *No More Heroes III* no matter who you ask. Detractors will say it looks and plays like a PlayStation 2 game, which is fair, and those who love it will say it's all by design, which is funny. I personally wouldn't put it past creator Goichi "SUDA51" Suda to work some kind of bizarre magic to make Travis play like he's still strutting around in 2007. There's no time to think about the engine under it all, though, because *No More Heroes III* never stops revving up long enough for anyone to really care.

The story this time around builds on everything that came before it, so while you can definitely pick this one up and have fun without previous knowledge of the series, Suda clearly made it for the fans. Set two years after the events of *Travis Strikes Again*, our antihero's return to Santa Destroy finds him immediately facing off against a brand new threat. 20 years prior, an alien named FU promised a young human boy named Damon Ricotello that he would return to Earth in 20 years, and when he makes good on that promise he's a full-grown alien prince who goes by Jess-Baptiste VI. FU is bad news, to say the least, and his first order of business is to team up with Damon to take over Earth and establish the Galactic Superhero Rankings, inviting the strongest fighters to take him and his many cohorts on to decide the fate of the planet.

Naturally, Travis is up to the task, and before you can even soak in the opening moments he's already off to challenge the bottom rung of a top 10 ladder chock full of superpowered aliens. Once Travis is ranked, the familiar gameplay loop that makes *No More Heroes* what it is establishes itself nicely. Between intense boss battles, Travis has to pass qualifying bouts and earn enough money to enter the next title fight. Doing so involves everything from plunging toilets to defending against waves of enemies, launching into space to battle massive monsters in your mech, and yes, mowing lawns. When you're literally putting off cutting your own grass while virtually mowing in Santa Destroy, you know you're neck deep in *No More Heroes*.

Suda has always worn his love for video games, tokusatsu, movies, and music on his sleeve in his own creations, and the tradition continues here. There are so many nods to other media within *No More Heroes III* that it becomes a technicolor pastiche of pop culture inspiration. Sound effects, visuals, and lively mid-chapter talk show chats about Travis's favorite Takashi Miike movies give Grasshopper's game a special kind of warmth that always comes off as genuine. It never feels like a cynical attempt to shove nostalgia in the face of the audience; it just seems like Travis himself got a chance to make his dream game and opted for what he would probably refer to as some genuinely rad shit.

That's essentially what *No More Heroes III* is, after all. It's a total mess at times—the open world environments are barren and don't have much life to them, and many of the mid-battle exclamations will grate on your nerves after the first couple of hours—but it's confident. The combat at the heart of it all becomes downright thrilling, especially once you learn more skills and get in a real rhythm against the many stylish bosses. It gives the impression of a team going all out and throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks, like it's the last game they'll ever make. Maybe it really will be the last hurrah for the series, but after rising in the ranks one more time I can't help but hope Travis strikes again.

—Joseph Luster

# Ghost of Tsushima: Iki Island

## Once more into battle!

**PUBLISHER**
Sony

**DEVELOPER**
Sucker Punch Productions

**SYSTEM(S)**
PS4, PS5

**RATING**
M

*Ghost of Tsushima*, the PlayStation 4's veritable swan song, was a gorgeous game that also came packed to the brim with content. It was a moving tribute to classic samurai films, an exemplary action game, and an immersive, narrative-driven experience that was well worth investing time in. Now, the game's first paid expansion, the *Iki Island* DLC, is here. As part of the *Ghost of Tsushima Director's Cut* release, it takes everything we loved about the original game and expands upon it with a whole new island, a new story chapter, additional side quests, and a bevy of new secrets waiting for you to discover.

*Iki Island* welcomes players who have completed at least Act 2 of the main game's campaign, where hero Jin meets a group of Mongols, whose leader is nicknamed The Eagle, who want to lead a raiding party to invade Tsushima from the nearby Iki Island. Jin decides to cut off the invasion before it can begin and heads there on his own to clip The Eagle's wings and

# Boyfriend Dungeon

## Dungeon-crawling dates with a twist

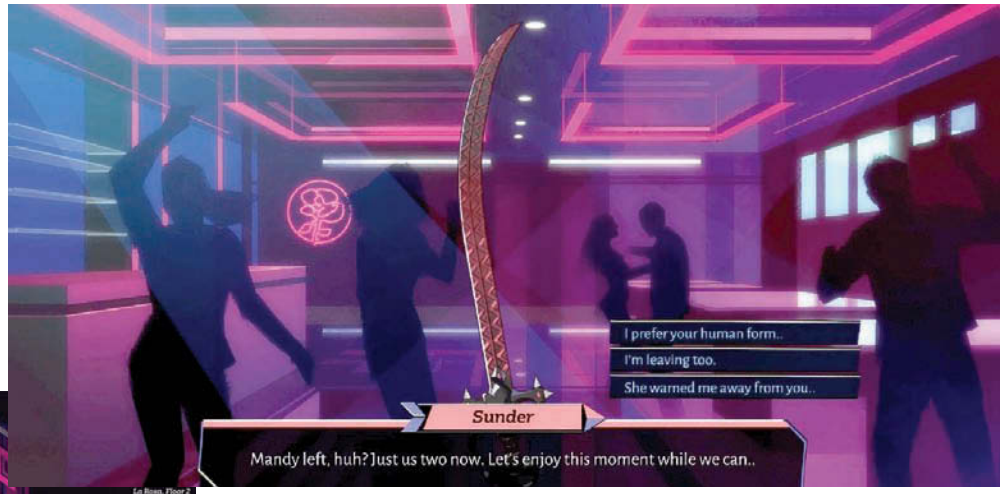
**PUBLISHER**
Kitfox Games

**DEVELOPER**
Kitfox Games

**SYSTEM(S)**
Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PC

**RATING**
T

Dungeon crawlers, especially isometric ones, are a dime a dozen. That's why, when games like *Boyfriend Dungeon* pop up, with intriguing premises and twists on the usual formula, they're so exciting to see. This colorful adventure from Kitfox Games takes the tried-and-true formula we've seen in several similar titles and repurposes it a bit, melding it with the sensibilities of a dating sim.



*Boyfriend Dungeon* puts you in the shoes of someone who's spending time at a special beachside town for the summer in an effort to find love. You've never experienced it before, let alone dated anyone, so there are several opportunities for firsts here. And while the local hotspots like the nightclub or cafe are great choices to find a partner, the real action happens inside dungeons, or a "dunj." That's where you'll make real connections with humans who can turn into weapons.

Yes, the potential romantic partners in *Boyfriend Dungeon* are the very weapons you'll use to defeat monsters and delve further into the "dunj" to learn more about yourself, have fun,

stop the intended results from getting even worse.

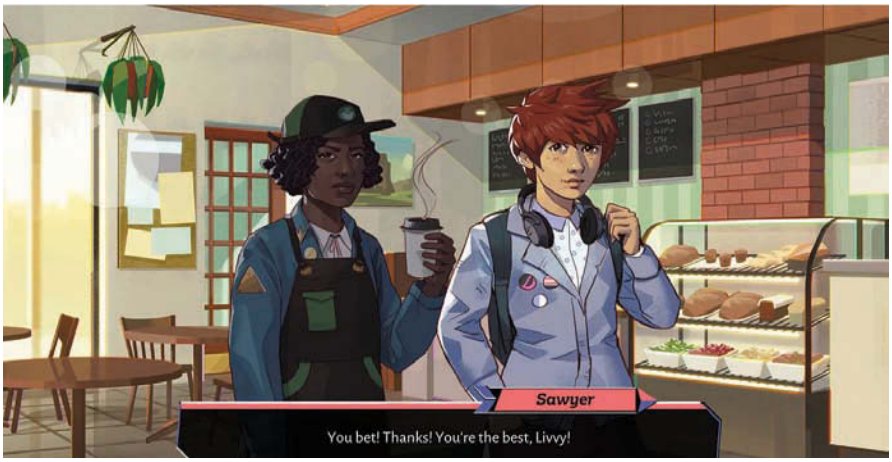
Jin must grapple with his own feelings about Iki Island while there, as they relate to the death of someone important to him. As a result, there's much to learn about Jin and the past that haunts him, as well as some intriguing new nuggets of truth that you may not have been expecting. But while the story is entertaining enough on its own, the *Iki Island* expansion DLC shines with just how much there is to do across the island.

Scattered throughout the island are a wide variety of new challenges, animal sanctuaries, side quests, flashbacks, and much more. If you've gone through the main game, you'll be privy to some fun surprises here and there, but you'll also unearth some new changes that you'll want to unravel immediately. Of course, while you'll be tempted to check out everything on the horizon, infiltration missions and the like will let you take out the Mongols before they can regroup enough to begin their invasion. With new enemy types that force you to swap between stances and figure out new ways to defeat them, even combat feels refreshed. If you were hoping you'd get to test your mettle against different enemies, fear not—you absolutely will.

Whether you're interested in roaming the island and seeing everything it has to offer or you're looking strictly to continue Jin's story in the most nuanced of ways, this feature-rich package has everything you need for an exciting new journey baked into it. Completing the main storyline can take every bit of six to eight hours, even for the most diligent among us, and completionists will find plenty to do scattered throughout the new story additions while trying to fill collections and scout out some of the hidden secrets.

If you thoroughly enjoyed the main game of *Ghost of Tsushima* when it first debuted, there's plenty more of it to mop up here. It's well worth the admission price, especially if narrative and character development are what you're looking for.

—Brittany Vincent



and collect loot. It's a weird world, alright, but certainly a fun one. From a dangerous Casanova to an artistic young woman and everyone in between, *Boyfriend Dungeon* throws gorgeous swords, sharp daggers, and even lightsaber-like weapons at you. You become their wielder, and you get closer and closer to each weapon.

You can date everyone at once if you'd like, as there are plenty of opportunities for dunj dates, or you can take it slow and choose the weapon person you like the best and watch things develop from there. Customize your clothes, craft items, and pore over skills you've learned in your apartment, and then leave home to go out and buy items and equipment, clothes, or hang out with your potential romantic partner.

But it's in the dunj where things really start to heat up. You'll fight your way through floor after floor of challenging monsters, work through as many as you can before dying, and then go through it all again—just what you'd expect from roguelike elements. If you're juggling a few romances at once, you'll benefit from unlocking additional spells, attacks, and other cool ways to eliminate the enemies on the battlefield.

Watching your relationships play out much like they would in real life as you fight alongside your favorite weapon people is immensely satisfying, and the biggest part of what makes *Boyfriend Dungeon* so fun to jump into. If this is the genre you get the most out of and enjoy every aspect of dating sims coming together with dungeon crawlers, you'd be remiss not to try it, even if it's just for the colorful, sprightly attitude and graphics. It's a game built to be endlessly entertaining, and it's a great adventure to enjoy a few steps at a time.

—Brittany Vincent

# 12 Minutes

## Breaking the loop

**PUBLISHER**
Annapurna Interactive

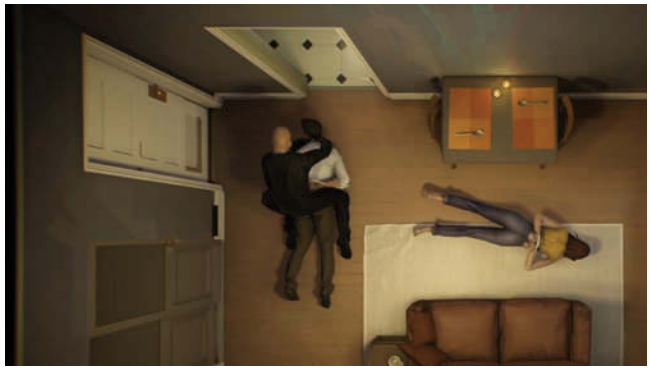
**DEVELOPER**
Luis Antonio

**SYSTEM(S)**
Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PC

**RATING**
M

You and your wife are enjoying a quiet evening in. She's made dessert, and she's got a surprise she can't wait to tell you. All of a sudden, there's a knock at the door. Before you can react, a man identifying himself as the police knocks the door down, then proceeds to accuse your wife of murder. You fight back, ask questions, and then all of a sudden, the world goes black. You wake up once more in the middle of your living room—but it's all happening again. What's going on?

That's the type of whirlwind *12 Minutes* takes you on—an exciting journey that you're never quite sure how it will end. The game doesn't hold your hand, either. You're left to your own devices, from start to finish, as you work to get to the bottom of this strange situation. What could possibly be going on that your wife is now a murder suspect? The answer lies within reverse engineering of the happenings. You've got to start clicking around, interacting with objects around you, and building a narrative.



The game plays out much like any other point-and-click adventure game, except the adverse actions you wouldn't think you could take, like killing yourself or killing your wife, can very well happen. There's also one major twist: the game, and your char-

# Scarlet Nexus

## ESParty Time

**PUBLISHER**
Bando Namco Entertainment

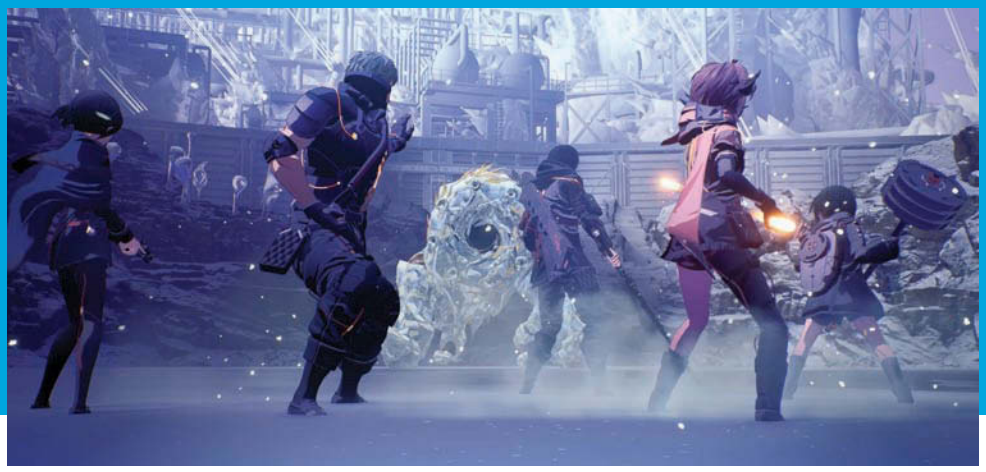
**DEVELOPER**
Bandai Namco Studios, Tose

**SYSTEM(S)**
PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PC

**RATING**
T

Bandai Namco has been really into making "playable anime" a thing, but that usually comes in the form of licensed games like their takes on *My Hero Academia* in *My Hero One's Justice* and other similar arena-style brawlers. *Scarlet Nexus* pushes that promise a little further in the form of a mixed media project, with the game launching pretty much right alongside a TV anime that was simulcast on Funimation. Even if you didn't check out the anime, the *Scarlet Nexus* game is anime enough on its own, and the psychokinetic action at its core makes for a nice hook to keep you charging through the main campaign.

The story of *Scarlet Nexus* will be familiar to most. It's your typical "new recruit on the job" yarn, this time following either Yuito Sumeragi or Kasane Randall, both members of the OSF, or Other Suppression Force, a group tasked with defending New Himuka from strange crea-



acter's life, resets every 12 minutes, as the title implies. Your character (and you, of course) retain all the information you glean during each runthrough, but everything resets once that 12 minutes has elapsed. That means you've got to take what you learn each time and run with it, whether that's a lot or a little.

For instance, you learn early on that you shouldn't tussle with the accusing police officer, as he'll just end your life with a couple of punches, and you're back at the start. But try to goad him into another room where he might be stunned by an electrical problem and subsequently knocked out? That's a different story entirely. There are moments like these sprinkled throughout the entirety of the game. You just have to find them and figure out how to approach each one.

Similarly, if you play the game's narrative "straight" and have the dinner you're supposed to with your wife, you learn about her surprise, and additional details she has that might come in handy later when it comes to unraveling what the policeman means when he says she's murdered her father. Did she actually do it? You'll have to figure things out by picking up items, combining them with others, and exhausting every possibility until you come up with a truth that fits.

This may not be everyone's cup of tea, especially considering you might not be excited about seeing the same dialogue and happenings taking place over and over again. And you will have to deal with this, but if you know what you're doing, it won't be alone. There's a kind of catharsis that comes along with solving the puzzle before you that's rare these days, so if you're into working out mysteries, there's a lot to love about *12 Minutes*.

So whether you want to know the key to the puzzle before you or you just want something unorthodox to play, consider picking up this gem. It's short but sweet, and you won't find anything else completely like it out on the market.

—Brittany Vincent

tures known as Others. Actually, the OSF acronym kind of covers all of that, so it's a pretty straightforward setup. The cutscenes are as dramatic as one would expect, but they're entertaining enough to skim through as you wait to jump into the next action-packed mission.

Taking down Others is the bread and butter of *Scarlet Nexus*, and the way you go about it is plenty stylish. In addition to melee moves, both characters can use psychokinesis to toss objects both small and large at enemies, and the key to victory is mixing up both attack styles at once. There's something uniquely satisfying about smacking around a malformed monster with your sword while using your mind to hit it from behind with the broadside of a minivan. It sounds like it could become a little too convoluted from a control perspective, but it all works well and the styles meld seamlessly in the heat of combat. New mechanics are regularly introduced, so get ready for a ton of tutorial pop-ups as you progress through the early hours of *Scarlet Nexus*.

Beyond the combat, the real standout aspect has to be the creature design. The team behind the game wanted to emphasize the "foreignness" of the enemies, which eventually found art director Kouta Ochiai landing on artist Masakazu Yamashiro to get the job done. Yamashiro made standout monsters by adding grotesque elements to everyday ideas, like demonic goat legs in high heels combined with an overflowing vase of beautiful flowers. The idea of combining two things that visually repel one another became an inexorable aspect of the overall design, bringing beauty and death together in style.

There are a lot of ideas in *Scarlet Nexus*, adding up to a beefy game that can get pretty lengthy if you want to accomplish every single task. Not all of those ideas work in full or come together as effortlessly as those extraordinary designs, but the world is an interesting one and there are a few memorable characters mixed in among the monster-battling military tropes. Some of Bandai Namco's original games—like *Code Vein*, for instance—have done a decent job of expanding on established ideas, but *Scarlet Nexus* at least feels fairly original in its overall execution. If ripping air conditioners off of buildings and hurling them at a stampeding, slobbering monstrosity sounds like your idea of a good time, well, there aren't many other games fitting that very specific bill right now.

—Joseph Luster

# Off the Rack

**Hello fellow Otaku!** Cosplay has always been a hobby meant for everyone, regardless of skill level in sewing or armor making, regardless of time constraints and regardless of finances. Having cosplayed since 2008, it's been incredible to watch the evolution of cosplay and, in particular, the increase in the availability, cost and quality of pre-made cosplay costumes. Purchasing a cosplay online was once a nerve-racking process, but now there are dozens of sites to choose from and with competitive pricing. Here are some simple ways to take your store-bought cosplay and make it your own.

Tailoring is the first way to make a costume your own, literally, by fitting it precisely to your body. Even spandex bodysuits rarely fit a cosplayer perfectly in all places, despite carefully measuring and comparing to size charts. When in doubt with sizing, it is always easier to go up a size and tailor down where necessary. Have a friend help pin areas that need to be taken in and either sew those areas or use a fusible webbing if you can't sew. Tailoring isn't just making sure the clothing fits against your body, it should also work to accentuate your body. That might mean adjusting pants or skirt hems if you are shorter or taller.

Upgrading materials or parts of a purchased costume can make a world of difference in its appearance. For example, the fur on some premade costumes can be of a lower quality and thus seems flat, rather than plush. By replacing this, you add extra volume and texture to the costume. Belts are similarly cheaply made to cut costs on stock costumes. By replacing them with real belts or belts made of a thicker leather, you can add a sense of real world usage to your cosplay.

If you really want to make your cosplay look more realistic, make them appear worn and used. Time to get them a little dirty. No adventurer goes through their journey perfectly clean and that added realism can bring your cosplay to life. Aging can easily be accomplished using tea or coffee stains for fabrics or adding a rust-like patina to "metal" pieces. Fraying hems or wearing out certain areas of clothing can be done with some sandpaper but keep the fraying to areas that would naturally get the most wear like elbows and knees.

Using acrylic paint you can also create the look of dirt in between crevices. The key to aging and distressing is thinking about where dirt and grime would naturally build up. Dirt is going to wedge into small spaces that can't be easily washed away. If your character is from a dusty or arid area, rub away some color in places for a sun-bleached look. Try to visualize how your character would look, in their natural environment.

By making a few adjustments and additions, you've now easily taken a store bought costume and made it your own and unique!

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Limited Aperture

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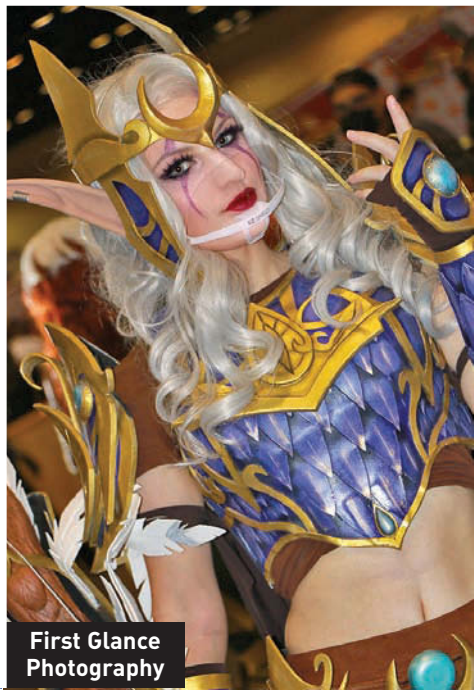
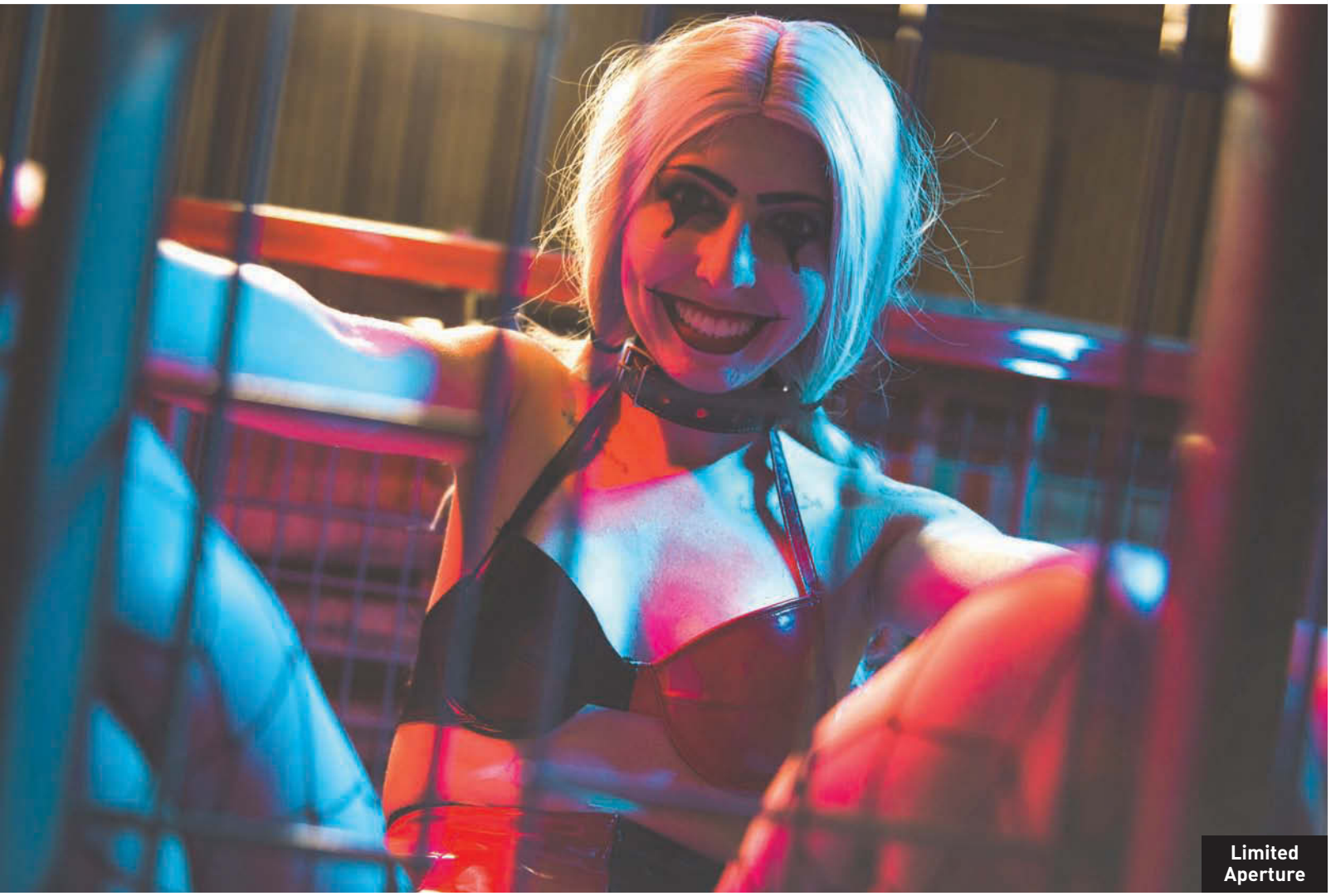


First Glance Photography

So Say We All Photography

So Say We All Photography



Limited Aperture

Limited Aperture

Limited Aperture

Bottom Row: First Glance Photography

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NARUTO NEXT GENERATIONS
The Mujina Gang
Boruto and Mitsuki are imprisoned in Hozuki Castle!
ENGLISH DUB AVAILABLE ON BLU-RAY
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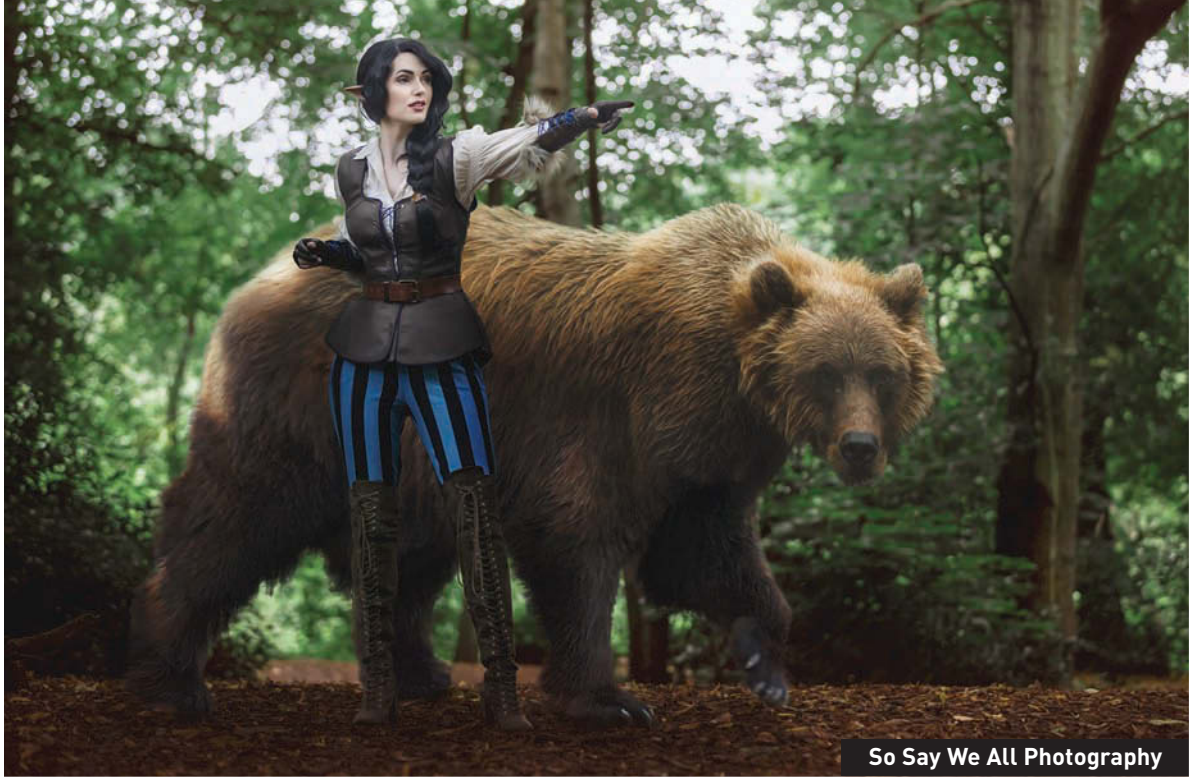

So Say We All Photography

First Glance Photography

Middle Row: First Glance Photography

First Glance Photography

So Say We All Photography

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OTAKU **OWARI** By Kara Dennison

# Before Evangelion

## Three Mecha Anime That Challenged the Genre, Too

*Now that the world has seen the last of* Evangelion *(short of merchandise for days, of course), a lot of people are feeling abandoned. Some are lonely in the wake of "Eva Loss," but for others, it's a desire to sink their teeth into more mecha anime in the same vein.*

*Hidekai Anno explored both personal and industry issues by bending (and breaking) mecha and tokusatsu tropes. But, of course, he wasn't the first to play fast and loose with the genre. Here are some more series that challenged (and sometimes changed) giant robot anime.*

### Martian Successor Nadesico

**(TV series, 1996-1997)**

Almost a year to the day after *Evangelion* premiered, *Martian Successor Nadesico* hit the airwaves. The series slammed together comedy,

mecha action, space opera, and harem anime to create a show as weird and warped as the crew of its title ship. At the same time, it paid tribute to giant robot shows by both challenging and imitating them, leading to some truly gut-punching moments.

Most memorably, the show contains Go Nagai-alike, the favorite anime of protagonist Akito and heroic space pilot Guy. And *Nadesico* uses that show-within-a-show to good effect. Akito learns that his real-world job isn't quite like his favorite show depicted it—but he can still pull comfort and inspiration from it.

### Mobile Suit Gundam

**(TV series, 1979-1980)**

Albeit for different reasons, *Evangelion* shares a lot with Yoshiyuki Tomino's—the first series, at least. Both star a reluctant young protagonist who is nothing like the gutsy, sideburned stars of 1970s super robot anime. In fact, both series pull things down to a much more realistic level all around. Because there are people out there (the author of this piece not included) who *wouldn't* see piloting a giant robot as a gift in itself.

Does having an ability that could help others obligate you to use it? That's what Amuro Ray finds himself contending with, as he finds his Newtype abilities in high demand. But his story and Shinji's diverge significantly beyond that, with a new sort of hero emerging from the fray. So if you've not sat down to the original *Gundam* yet ... that's as good an excuse as any.

### Brave Raideen

**(TV series, 1975-1976)**

The super-robot boom of the 1970s seems like the furthest thing in the world from *Evangelion.* But in 1975, director Tadao Nagahama stepped into the director's chair for *Brave Raideen,* taking over from Tomino. Nagahama injected human drama into the toy-selling Saturday morning cartoon, about a boy named Akira who discovers he's the descendant of an ancient race.

The god-like Raideen, the first anime of mystical origins rather than scientific, also brought a dose of paranormal action to the mecha scene. It may not be a terrifying biomechanical giant with your mom inside, but it is its own brand of otherworldly. And it spearheaded Nagahama's *Robot Romance Trilogy*—a trio of series that proved that giant robot anime could tell complex, dramatic stories. Like, you know, *Evangelion.*

Based on the original graphic novel "Inuyasha" by Rumiko Takahashi, published by Shogakukan Inc.
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